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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the role of Lao folk opera as a medium for constructively addressing problems of cultural conflict and acculturative stress that have risen among lowland Lao refugees and their children in urban America. The central focus of the inquiry is on the ways Lao folk opera currently functions as a learning medium in the resettlement context. The need for validation of such locally produced endogenous media has become increasingly apparent as long term resettlement issues continue to emerge as threats to linguistic and cultural diversity. The review of literature encompasses the role of oral specialists in traditional societies, Buddhist epistemology in the Theravada tradition, and community education in rural Lao culture. These sources provide the background necessary to an understanding of the medium's capacity for encapsulating culture and teaching ethical values in ways that connect past to present, distant to near. (Author)

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ED 368 224

SINGING THE LIVES OF THE BUDDHA:
LAO FOLK OPERA AS AN EDUCATIONAL MEDIUM

A Dissertation Presented

by

JEAN BERNARD-JOHNSTON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 1993

School of Education

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JEAN BERNARD-JOHNSTON

Approved as to style and content by:

Robert J. Miltz

Robert J. Miltz, Chair

Juan P. Caban

Juan P. Caban, Member

James A. Hafner

James A. Hafner, Member

John C. Carey

Bailey W. Jackson, Dean
School of Education

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ABSTRACT

SINGING THE LIVES OF THE BUDDHA:
LAO FOLK OPERA AS AN EDUCATIONAL MEDIUM

MAY, 1993

JEAN BERNARD-JOHNSTON
B.A., THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
M.A.T., ST. MICHAEL'S COLLEGE
Ed.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS
Directed by: Professor Robert J. Miltz

Lao folk opera is a unique blend of popular theatre and sung poetry performed among Lao-speaking people of rural Southeast Asia for a wide range of social and religious purposes. As a traditional medium for popular education, its primary function has been to preserve the cultural identity of the ethnic Lao by re-enacting ancient myths, local folk legends, and morality tales based on the penultimate lives of the Buddha.

This dissertation explores the role of Lao folk opera as a medium for constructively addressing problems of cultural conflict and acculturative stress that have arisen among lowland Lao refugees and their children in urban America. The central focus of the inquiry is on the ways Lao folk opera currently functions as a learning medium in the resettlement context. The need for validation of such locally produced endogenous media has become increasingly apparent as long term term resettlement issues continue to emerge as threats to linguistic and cultural identity.

The review of literature encompasses the role of oral specialists in traditional societies, Buddhist epistemology in the Theravada tradition, and community education in rural Lao culture. These sources provide the background necessary to an understanding of the medium's capacity for encapsulating culture and teaching ethical values in ways that connect past to present, distant to near.

The field research, which was accomplished in collaboration with a Lao folk opera troupe based in New England, adapted the action research model originally proposed by Kurt Lewin to the principles of Buddhist community education. The videotaped performance of a drama based on the refugee experience and subsequent audience reactions formed the main body of qualitative data.

Group reflections revealed that the medium provides a viable context for performance artists to assume the role of critical culture makers with a potent educational agenda. Recommendations include the encouragement of local media producers to take advantage of community access facilities to counteract the homogenizing influences of the dominant media and the more active inclusion of elders in the transfer of language and culture across generational borders.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

What is Lao Folk Opera?

This study explores the potential of a traditional ethnic performance medium for family centered learning within the context of a resettled refugee community in New England. The decision to adopt "Lao folk opera" as the most suitable term in English to describe current forms of this art form is based on two factors. First, its essential element is its unique style of rhythmic sung poetry (*lam*) which incorporates the linguistic features, themes, and cultural traditions of the ethnic Lao of Southeast Asia. Secondly, the origins, development, and popularity of *lam* within its cultural context distinguish it as a folk art with the thematic flexibility, humor, and improvisational qualities of popular drama. Hence the term "folk opera" to describe a popular dramatic medium which is predominantly musical, and which reflects the lives, dreams, and hopes of ordinary people functioning at the lower levels of a given socioeconomic system.

The Cultural Context

As distinguished from the term "Laotian," which encompasses all of the ethnic groups originating from within the political boundaries of modern Laos, the term "Lao" describes the language and culture of the people who populate the lowland areas of the Mekong Valley west of the Annamite Chain and practice wet rice agriculture. The *lao loum,*or lowland Lao are distinguished from the Lao of the mountainsides (*lao theung*) and mountaintops (*lao soung*), make up a slight majority of the population of modern Laos, and are among the 151 ethnic groups that populate mainland Southeast Asia (Miller 1987:10). In addition to the *lao loum* who dwell within the political boundaries of modern Laos, (approximately 1.7 of 3.6 million) another 14.7 million ethnic Lao live in northeastern Thailand, having once comprised a significant area of the expansive kingdom of Lan Xang based in Luang Prabang.

Today, as a direct result of the United States military intervention in Southeast Asia and its disastrous consequences, some 100,000 lowland Lao who fled as refugees have resettled in North America. As distinguished from the upland minorities who also fled Laos during the same era, the lowland Lao speak a language closely related to Thai, practice a blend of Therevada Buddhism and spirit worship, eat glutinous rice, and compose oral, sung poetry (*lam*) accompanied by a bamboo reed instrument known as the *khaen*.

The Medium

Lam is a uniquely Lao performance genre which has traditionally functioned not only a form of entertainment, but also the main source of news (Fall 1960; Miller 1985) throughout the loosely connected network of Lao-speaking villages along the river banks and plains of areas that now fall within the boundaries of modern Laos and Thailand. The oral poets and performers (*moh lam*) have also applied the medium as a popular educational tool for both religious and political purposes. Like other traditional art forms, Lao folk opera has preserved and generated additions to the collective store of age-old legends, historical events, and folk tales which pass on and regenerate local knowledge from one generation to the next as they revitalize language and affirm popular culture.

Current performance styles in Laos and northeastern Thailand have grown out of the oral poetic and musical forms that probably accompanied the T'ai peoples on their migration from southern China between the sixth and thirteenth centuries A.D. The popular Buddhism that spread throughout the Kingdom of Lan Xang in the 14th century heavily influenced both the content and style of this oral tradition, incorporating the medium for its own educational purposes, yet at the same time providing a context for it to flourish along more secular lines.

Lam was, and in many places still is, a popular medium of expression used for courtship, the recitation of religious manuscripts, story-telling, and the exorcism of demons. The main requirement is that it be composed in verse, four line stanzas with seven syllables per line, which obey certain tonal and rhyming patterns. *Lam* is universally accompanied by the *khaen*, which requires considerable expertise and endurance to play. Singers are known as *moh lam*, or experts at *lam*, while *khaen* players are called *moh khaen*. Traditional village performances are staged by a single *moh khean* and one or two *moh lam*, while modern troupes, heavily influenced by Thai dramatic genre and Western electronic music, may consist of up to twenty performers plus a full rock band. Electrical equipment, particularly stage lighting and amplification systems have also altered the appearance and style of *moh lam* performances.

Some of the most common themes in a typical troupe's repertoire are based in the *Jataka*, a collection of tales about the penultimate lives of the Buddha, through which important lessons for living are taught through parable and metaphor (Tambiah 1968; Miller 1985). Other popular themes include courtship and love, regional folktales, historical epics, and popular legends. The choice of theme and style for a particular performance is governed mainly by the occasion, which in Southeast Asia is generally a temple fair or a family celebration A typical village performance, which may last from late in the evening until the next morning (about eight hours), is described by Compton as "a synthesis of extemporaneous poetry, folk music, and dance" (1979:94). While earlier performances may have occurred spontaneously and informally, *moh lam* performances in present day Laos and Thailand tend to be pre-arranged and highly professionalized. Such performances are generally outside on a wooden stage constructed within a temple compound or on a family's veranda, with the audience seated on mats or squatting on the ground. The performers are either formally sponsored by a family or temple organization and are usually free to the audience. Milling about, coming and going, and socializing is common during a public *moh lam* performance, with a wide variety of refreshments readily available. By the late stages of the performance, most of the audience has retired, leaving only the elders in rapt attention until dawn. Popular *moh lam* are well paid and in high demand both in Laos and throughout northeastern Thailand.

Until the last few decades, *lam* was an entertaining pastime for all villagers, and not exclusively the domain of highly trained professionals. European travelers (d'Orleans 1894; Le Boulanger 1889; Reinach 1907) and the Lao historian (Abhay 1959) wrote with great admiration of spontaneous performances by boatmen, traders, village elders, and young people seeking romantic partners. There were no written or printed scripts, and performance techniques were either improvised or passed on informally from knower to learner. More recently, *moh lam* training has become more rigorous, requiring basic literacy skills, musical talent and compositional expertise. Although there are no formal schools or training institutes exclusively for *lam*, retired performers often make a livelihood by taking on apprentices. Interestingly, the village temple, as the main source of literacy and learning, often plays a tutorial role, especially for would-be *moh lam* who have not had the benefit of formal schooling.

The role of live folk opera as an educational medium was established throughout Laos and Northeastern Thailand long before the relatively recent introduction of radio, television, and film. However, once these electronic media were introduced, they broadened the applications of lam, and in many ways transformed its appearance (Recchi 1968; Miller 1985). While observations on the ways the modern influences of electrical equipment, electronic instruments, and modern media have changed performance styles in the refugee context would make an intriguing study in themselves, they are peripheral to the central focus of this study. The section on historical development and present forms of *lam* is intended to inform in terms of educational potential rather than to analyze these complex changes from an ethnographic or artistic perspective.

Lam has also begun to emerge as a popular performance medium among Lao-American immigrants in New England, both through the circulation of imported audio and video tapes and occasional live performances. The troupe upon whose work the field portion of this study is based consists of an informally organized group of performers and musicians in the Providence, Rhode Island area. A performance by this troupe is typically billed as a "party," given in a large community hall rented for the evening with a hefty admission fee charged. Such performances are lengthy, beginning in the early evening and ending at two or three the next morning. Dancing by the audience is encouraged in the intervals between acts of the drama. Over the past two years, the Providence troupe has acquired and trained several new singers and significantly expanded its repertoire. Additional live performance engagements have included a showcase event at the Boston Children's Museum (1989) and a weekend marathon on the grounds of a national Lao Buddhist temple under construction in Manassas, Virginia (1992).

The emergence of Lao Buddhist religious practices and institutions, community networking, and recovery of the performing arts such as *lam* have played major roles in the rebuilding process. Emerging as it has from a society in which the means of communication are fundamentally oral and deeply musical, *lam* is a modern example of folk drama based on a rich and accessible oral tradition. Like other forms of folk drama and ethnic theatre, Lao folk opera is more than a cultural artifact. It is a dynamic educational medium that has multiple dimensions and works on many levels to inform, to engage, to confront, and to challenge its audiences to bring about personal or social change. Simultaneously, Lao folk opera performers are consummate entertainers who know how to please and delight as they drive their messages home. Both as an art form and an educational medium, *lam* traditionally holds a central place in Lao culture - it is an expression of its value system, its history, its moral code, and its humor.

As practised in rural Laos, northeastern Thailand, and in resettled refugee communities in North America, Lao folk opera has played a key role in the preservation of Lao language and culture. In an era disrupted by war, political upheaval, forced migration, and cultural domination, maintenance of such modes of expression are vital to concepts of national, regional, and ethnic identity.

The Study

The Problem

Virtually none of the Lao who arrived in the United States as refugees during the 1970's and 80's had a realistic idea of what to expect. Few, if any, perceived that their migration would eventually result in the loss of economic autonomy, the complete change in lifestyle, or the cultural conflicts they were to experience long after resettlement.

Along with other Southeast Asians, the Lao faced a reception ranging from open generosity to violent expressions of intolerance. External perspectives on Lao refugees are generally defined in the language of legal jargon, outright prejudice, or stereotypical images of Southeast Asian cultures fueled by the mass media.

Today, Lao communities in America are beset with a host of problems, ranging from chronic economic marginalization to the disintegration of spiritual values and cultural norms (Westermeyer 1976; Berry 1976; Muecke 1987; Sen 1987). The pervasive attitude tends to be one of capitulation among the older generation, while younger community members struggle with issues of cultural identity. With the shrinkage of external support networks, communities have increasingly relied on their own resources. The resulting shift in relationships invites collaboration with community leaders, healers, and artists on more equitable grounds. Yet little has been done to recognize and validate these endogenous sources, allowing the sense of abandonment felt by Lao elders and the social marginalization experienced by the younger generation to intensify. As a result, alarming manifestations of these internal conflicts, including widespread violence and drug abuse, continue to emerge despite continuing community efforts to deal with them.

The need for research that addresses longer term resettlement issues is well stated by Marjorie Muecke in the preface to her study of the lowland Lao in Seattle:

> ...remarkably underreported in the literature are cultural interpretations of refugee phenomena Consequently, we know little about how different groups of refugees resolve discontinuities in world views that they confront by resettling in a country of radically different cultural-historical heritage than their country of origin; about how they make sense of the chaos that they have experienced; or about how they explain their being refugees, about their suffering, to themselves and their children. (1987:274)

In stark contrast to the well-publicized economic success stories of a select few Southeast Asian refugees in America, new and unexpected issues have emerged to plague Lao-American communities as memories of the homeland become more distant, and as children born in America begin to come of age.

Given the reality of an increasingly multilingual, multicultural society, efforts to broaden channels of cross-cultural communication must intensify in a way that addresses the core issues of identity and discrimination. Paths of inquiry which seek to understand, among other things, the shapes of local knowledge integral to a group's ethnicity can lead to the kind of mutual awareness that may be capable of breaking down centuries of prejudice. Thus,the urgency for developing such paths in a nation of immigrants, where peoples are thrown together by force of circumstance is far more pressing than it would be in a world without the violent upheavals and economic disparities which precipitate wars and migrations across cultures.

Ways of perceiving the world, and indeed the universe, that were once in comfortably distant lands may now be among the guiding principles that shape the perceptions of the people next door. In contrast to immigrant populations from Europe and Latin America, Southeast Asian cultures have brought with them unique ways of perceiving, knowing, and behaving that are not only very different from those of European traditions, but are also profoundly diverse among themselves. Symbols and manifestations of these once distant worlds are sometimes regarded by the dominant society as exotica to be displayed and preserved, and at others looked upon with fear, suspicion, and in some cases open hostility.

At the institutional level, these attitudes lead toward the legitimization of assimilationist educational policies that discredit the development of language, communication, and thinking skills that form the very foundations of culture.

After a decade and a half in America, Lao communities in America are struggling to redefine their ethnicity and reconstruct their lives in an environment that is at best confusing, but is more often perceived as destructive of Lao ways of knowing, communicating, and behaving. In general, the Lao in Providence continue to face long term, profound cultural conflicts and mental confusion as the result of their forced migration and adaptation to an urban, industrial existence in a foreign land.

In the development of transitional education and training programs for refugees, relatively little attention has been paid to the nature of existing educational practices and communication modes in rural Southeast Asia other than those introduced by foreign colonizers and developers. This neglect is at least partially responsible for the chronic failure of refugee education and training programs to reach the learners who are most in need of their services (Tollefson 1989).

Steeped in an assimilationist approach to the education of immigrants (Tollefson 1989; McClymer 1982) and armed with universal convictions about learning, program planners have generally neglected to take prior knowledge, differences in cognitive styles, or endogenous learning systems into account. With their emphasis on conventional literacy, ESL, and employment training, these programs diverge little from formal approaches to learning in that they fail to validate traditional ways of knowing or to invite learners to negotiate the content and style of the learning process.

Instead, program planners have treated the lack of formal schooling in the Western tradition as a deficit which refugees can only address by submitting to curricula which emphasize grueling remediation plans (Tollefson 1989) and monocultural orientation sessions. As a result, many older adults give up in frustration, sometimes after several unsuccessful tries, convinced of their inadequacy to learn. With their stores of traditional knowledge and skills ignored and their modes of transferring them invalidated, elders and retreat into lives of troubled isolation and despair (Bruno 1986; Boehnlein 1987).

From an educational media perspective, the greatest obstacles to the successful adjustment of Southeast Asian newcomers have arisen from the lack of convergence between educational practice, research in the social sciences, and ethnographic inquiry. Materials for learning in the adult refugee training context remain remarkably uninformed and uninspired by the considerable wealth of descriptive literature on Southeast Asian cultures. Perhaps most ironic is the frequent oversight by educators of older refugees as resources with rich stores of cultural knowledge that often go untapped. Continued divergence of interest has served to perpetuate unfavorable conditions for learning, and fueled the widespread tendency to blame the victims (Finagret 1988) rather than search for alternative educational solutions.

Approach

The presence of a large group of first generation Lao immigrants in New England and the existence of an active folk opera troupe based in Providence were the major factors that defined the goals and shaped the design of this inquiry. Therefore, my approach to the study of Lao folk opera as an educational medium begins as a recovery process, a multidisciplinary search for resources, both past and present, that may contribute to the growing awareness of the need for continuity with the past among community members of all ages. This process leads to the definition of a field research project, as reported in Chapter 7, which seeks to encourage community involvement in seeking new directions in education, both in and out of school, by addressing the problematic issues of linguistic and cultural identity.

The action research paradigm was chosen as an exploratory, culturally appropriate, and practical means of identifying current community issues by collaborating with a team of endogenous artists (the Providence troupe) on the production of a performance medium, then studying the process as a step toward more formal assessment of educational needs.

With this goal in mind, the focus on *lam* as an educational medium in the post-migration context is grounded in an extensive consideration of its origins and development its home context. While the field research based in Providence attempts to describe and explain its role as endogenous media in an industrialized, multicultural society, the review of its development in the agricultural societies of Laos and Northeastern Thailand uncover elements which may in fact become catalysts toward its further revitalization in America. In keeping with the goals of action research (Lewin 1946), the background on *lam* constructs a solid stage for setting into motion the first cycle of directed action and reflection in the Providence community. By recycling this information back into the community through various established channels, it forms a part of the general effort to re-establish and validate the cultural connections vital to the creation of viable educational alternatives.

Objectives

The broad objectives of this study are (1) to compile a detailed description of the traditional forms and applications of Lao folk opera in its home cultural context, and (2) to discover whether the medium is in the process of being successfully recast in the post-migration context to focus community attention on self-defined problems in a way that guides approaches to their solutions. These goals are ultimately intended to contribute toward a larger vision of media design that provides a viable alternative to the monocultural messages produced by both the educational establishment and the dominant mass media in America.

The exploration is process-oriented in that its emphasis is not only on *what* makes this particular medium appropriate or inappropriate, but also on *how* ethnic theatre in general can function as means of facilitating community problem solving. Therefore, the initial research question addressed by this study is:

> **How can Lao folk opera function as an issue-oriented learning medium in a refugee community?**

As explained in Chapter VIII, part of the discovery process served to clarify the assumptions upon which this somewhat arrogant question was posed, thereby modifying both the question and the proposed research model as my understanding of the issues and the action already underway in the community began to emerge. In addition, the complications of economic and spiritual survival in urban America have frequently interrupted the progression of inquiry and reflection, making the cycle one of irregular spurts and delays, with many of the most significant comments and reflections made at the least expected times and places.

Throughout the study, my guiding principle has been to compromise and collaborate, then reflect on the efficacy of both process and product as they fit into the daily routine of immigrant life in urban America. In both the literature review and the field based research project, I have sought to uncover evidence relevant to the thesis that ethnic folk drama in general, and the Lao folk opera in particular, is an extremely effective means of raising awareness on issues that may be difficult to address in other educational or entertainment contexts.

Of the seven chapters which follow, five are devoted to laying the groundwork for the field research component. I felt this background essential to an understanding of the medium in terms of its cultural context, both in Laos and in the post-migration context. As it happened, my plans for a neat, linear progression of community based action research were soon thwarted by practical imperatives, such as the premature departure of the troupe's leading lady, and later by the necessary sharing of power during the performance and field research phases. As a result, parts of the field research were set into motion while I was still immersed in the literature review. In the end, I found that the collaborative nature of the effort demanded adaptation of the research plan to the cultural time frames, space perceptions, and economic realities of the community.

Far from being detrimental to the study, however, this dimension of my experience with the Providence community enriched and guided my search for written, mostly historical sources. Conversely, sifting through the secondary sources on Lao history, culture, and folk opera increasingly influenced and enhanced the types of interaction I was having with the community, causing its parameters to evolve and expand with the dynamic of our emerging relationship.

My original intention was to present the fieldwork as both process and product in the larger context of the literature, to move from a general theoretical framework to the specific case. This path has remained largely intact, although there have been many meanderings, occasional false starts, and repeated returns to certain crossroads. Among other things, I have realized that the fieldwork for this study would really only comprise the first of a series of inquiries that would comprise a complete megacycle of action research addressing the feasibility of a medium in a particular context. Each spiral of the process uncovers as many new questions as it answers. Most importantly, there have been significant moments of realization along the way, at times local and common sense, at others touching on the universal.

Applications

Traditional Media for Modern Purposes

The consideration of a traditional performing art as an educational medium challenges the assumption that media is exclusively an instrument for the dissemination of information from the centers of power and authority. The definition of popular media encompasses the existence and importance of more diverse media formats, techniques, and technologies, many of which have developed in autonomous cultural settings for a wide range of teaching purposes.

The performing arts in North America which parallel *lam* in Asia include such non-mainstream genre as community theatre, ethnic theatre, popular theatre, story-telling, folk music, and folk drama. The story telling traditions of indigenous peoples and the poetic forms of the African-American oral tradition (Yasin 1992) bear particularly close resemblance to the cadences and social functions of *lam*. As alternatives to the dominance of the mainstream media, and often co-opted by it, these arts have provided vital popular means of expression for communities in their own languages, for their own purposes.

Drawing from a growing body of literature on the oral tradition (Lord 1965; Ong 1982; Havelock 1986) and the effects of literacy on traditional societies (Goody 1968; Tambiah 1968; Sweeney 1991), Chapter 2 seeks to reach some conclusions about the nature and and uses of folk drama in cultures that maintain strong oral traditions parallel to experiences with manuscript and print literacy.

By "modern purposes," I mean not only the transfer of knowledge and skills from one society to another, but also the internal use of traditional media to help a community cope with issues of cultural survival and identity in a changing world. To illustrate the use of folk drama in three very different contexts, descriptions of *pungwe* in Zimbabwe, *boria* in Malaysia, and *El Teatro Campesino* in California are presented as media which deal specifically with such issues, each presenting a unique blend of medium and message for a specific audience within a larger system of dominance or encroachment.

Toward Recovery and Reconstruction

Starting from the premise that community education programs in the United States would benefit from connecting with learners' prior knowledge and experiences, the insights gained from this type of inquiry would lead toward a reorientation of methodologies and development of teacher-learner relationships more compatible with non-Western cultures.

In the study of Lao culture, one quickly becomes aware of the close connection between religious and secular life and the close, personal nature of working and teaching relationships grounded in Buddhist educational practices. Therefore, to suggest approaches to the solution of current community problems without assisting in the recovery of traditional solutions in the process is to ignore the obvious, and most potent, source of healing.

Although mixed with the indigenous beliefs and practices that predated the spread of Buddhist teachings in the Mekong valley, it is the Triple Jewel of Buddhism - the Buddha, the *dhamma* (the teachings), and the *sangha* (order of monks) - that have dominated Lao ways of thinking and acting for some five hundred years. The interaction between the Lao *sangha* and the *moh lam*, as popular educator, is highly relevant to an informed approach to media choice, design, and delivery.

Chapter 3 reviews the literature on Buddhist approaches to teaching and learning as a step toward understanding the learning styles of first generation immigrants whose formative years were spent in the Lao village context. Beginning with a broad outline of Asian educational philosophy, the field is narrowed to specific modes of learning, categories of knowledge, and knower-learner roles in the Therevada Buddhist societies of Southeast Asia, which include the dominant cultures of Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. Therevada Buddhism, which spread to Southeast Asia from Sri Lanka beginning in the 12th century AD, is distinguished from the various forms of the Mahayana tradition by its strict monastic codes and its close attention to the original teachings of the historical Buddha.

The contribution made by the study Buddhist epistemology and teaching practices in Southeast Asia to the investigation of *lam* as an educational medium lies in the total integration of religious and secular life in lowland Lao society; Buddhist teachings play a major role in the way Lao people perceive their world and in the ways they go about learning. Although that role has diminished as the Lao seek to reconstruct their identity as Lao-Americans, it persists as an important, perhaps essential, influence in immigrant communities. The close ties between the practice of Buddhism and *lam* become apparent in Chapters 4 and 5, where the performing and visual arts are considered as popular religious educational media, and the relationship between the temple and the training of apprentice *moh lam* is described.

Literature Review

The literature reported in Chapter 2 supports the construction a general framework for the consideration of folk drama as educational media. Interdisciplinary in nature, this review includes studies in linguistics, communications theory, history, and literature. Central to the working concept of educational media defined in this chapter is the work of Albert Lord (1960), Eric Havelock (1963;1986), Walter Ong (1982), Deborah Tannen (1982), and James Gee (1986). Studies of the effects of literacy and orality in Southeast Asian societies were particularly helpful, namely those of J.S. Tambiah (1968; 1970) and Amin Sweeney (1992). Reviews of the three cases of folk drama were based on three types of literature; the report on *pungwe* in Zimbabwe is a first-hand account written by a Canadian theatre-for-development activist (Kidd 1984). The study of *boria* was originally a doctoral dissertation of a Malaysian anthropologist (Bujang 1987), and the piece on El Teatro Campesino is compiled from a combination of historical accounts and performance reviews (Browkaw 1983; Morton 1984; Shank 1985).

The description of Buddhist epistemology and learning systems in Chapter 3 is based on three types of sources: selections from the Pali canon (in translation), secondary sources on Therevada Buddhism, and two original handbooks written by Lao monks based in Providence. Since the Buddhist scriptures available in translation are in themselves far too voluminous for an untutored search, I looked first at the secondary sources on Buddhist education (Rahula 1959; Jayatilleke 1963; Pollack 1983; Hewage 1986). Of these works, What Buddha Taught by the Sri Lankan monk Ven. Walpola Rahula and The Raft by Thai scholar Mom Chao Jumbala (1974) offer excellent guides to translations of the Pali texts relevant to Buddhist ways of teaching and learning. In addition, two booklets published in English by the Wat Lao Buddhavas of Providence, Young Buddhists (1988) and Novices' Practice (1989) are valuable as primary teaching documents for the younger generation of Lao-Americans, many of whom are unable to read Lao script.

For the sake of comparison to other models of adult and community education, the literature review also includes summaries and comments based on the works of Paulo Frïere (1973;1987), Sulak Srivaraksa (1986;1988;1991), Naik Chitra (1982), A.T. Ariyaratne (1986), and Joanna Macy (1985).

The historical and anthropological sources on Laos available in English are less than extensive. These are reported in Chapter 4 in the interested of describing the historical context of *lam* for the purpose of understanding *lam* training based on the author's interviews with performers. Other valuable sources on *lam* include Tambiah's observations in his study of literacy in a northeastern Thai village (1968), Brandon's chapter on *moh lam* in Theatre in Southeast Asia, and an unpublished document written for USIS Vientiane in 1968 by consultant James Recchi.

Journal articles, surveys, and dissertations form the main body of literature on the cultural adaptation of the lowland Lao in America. In most of the survey literature, the ethnic Lao are not distinguished from other groups from Laos, and in some cases are grouped with other Southeast Asians. Both book-length studies which concentrate on the experience of lowland Lao refugees are ethnographies (Sen 1987; Proudfoot 1990) based on in-depth interviews with community members in Eugene, Oregon and Rockford, Illinois respectively. Proudfoot's study focuses on general cultural adaptation issues, while Sen's documents the specific way community members have adjusted to the demands of the new environment by restructuring aspects of their economic existence, spiritual lives, and kinship systems.

Refugees' reconstruction of identity in a Seattle community is the focus of a report by Marjorie Muecke (1987). This study analyzes the case of a cannibal ghost *(pii ka)* which has mysteriously haunted members of the community. Muecke offering cultures interpretations to the spiritual problems that have recently intensified as the result of uncertainty over the past, and stresses the need for the reconstruction of ethnic identity in America.

Using the information and insights from these sources to help shape the overall research design as well as specific interview topics, my approach to the Providence community is also described in Chapter 6. Its ultimate goal was to identify current community issues which could then be used by the *moh lam* troupe to construct a performance which would help dramatize, and therefore open a useful dialogue that would in turn offer suggestions for the future direction of community based educational programs.

As the preliminary stage of the fieldwork, the transition between past and present, external and internal, distant and local, is explored through through the perceptions of community leaders, a family, and seven individuals. A summary based on the points where these issues converge is reported as the first step in the action research cycle.

Field Research Design

Chapter 7 describes the project undertaken in collaboration with the Providence troupe, with emphasis on the performance and reflection stages as reflective means of designing a second research spiral. In Chapter 8, conclusions based on both the review of literature and the field research are presented, along with specific recommendations for long term, ongoing community based education programs in Lao-American communities.

Initially, the field component of this study was conceived as a complete action research project, implementing an adaptation of the model suggested in Kemmis & McTaggart's (1988) streamlined version of Kurt Lewin's (1946) original concept. This three-stage cycle consists of of (1) planning, (2) action/observation, and (3) reflection. Alterations made to the model before the field research was initiated added two preliminary steps to the cycle for the purpose of identifying issues and selecting appropriate themes. Using this model, the process of initiating, performing, videotaping, and reacting to a *moh lam* performance was carried out in collaboration with members of the Lao community in Providence. During the course of the study, additional adaptations to the research model were made, mainly as a result of practical considerations and constraints. In the end, the process became more closely aligned with Lewin's concept (1946) of the model as a long term, complex process made up of many consecutive spirals, each informed by the previous one. The identification, action, and reflection cycle with the *moh lam* troupe and the community thus became more clearly delineated as simply the first, reconnaissance or "fact finding" stage which would serve to inform the planning of further action. A description of these collected observations, together with an analysis of both process and performance, are included in the final chapter.

Part of the intention of action research is to initiate a dynamic that actively involves community members in the process of problem-solving rather than simply using them as informants or resources. As Sanford has pointed out, paradigms which require the researcher to stick to the role of detached observer or investigator tend to:

> ...dehumanize the 'respondents' for the sake of enterprises that never yielded any benefit to them....and dehumanize ourselves by encouraging self-definition in forms of specialization. (1981:77)

Throughout the action research project in Providence, I saw my role as researcher as one that alternated between that of learner, initiator, negotiator, facilitator, and observer. As a learner, I recovered a reasonable level of communicative facility in Lao, which had been virtually lost for some twenty years, and I also learned a great deal about how community members view themselves, their past, and their new life in America. As an initiator and negotiator, I set the performance stage in motion by contacting the *moh lam* troupe, discussing issues and options, then arranging the production details. This process was realized in part by a small grant from the Association for Asian Studies, which enabled me to offer the troupe a performance fee and pay their travel expenses.

As a facilitator, I saw my role as one of drawing out issues through individual conversations and group sessions, encouraging reflection, and seeking recommendations that might result in more effective approaches to community education than the programs currently available. Observations were made during the process as well as on immediate reflection, usually in the form of notes and audio tape recordings made at coffee stops on the way back from Providence. In each case, my objective was to note everything that happened, but to reflect in particular on the process, the interaction that took place, and the product (the information gained, agreement negotiated, performance rehearsed). To be completely neutral was not an objective; however, I have tried to treat each stage of implementation critically and to reach conclusions based on this experience which will be helpful to future researchers.

Significance

The significance of this study falls into two general realms: (1) local significance in terms of how the Lao-American community in Providence perceives itself, its problems, and their own abilities to achieve solutions, (2) broader significance as a process model for issue identification, media use, and educational needs analysis in an immigrant community.

Among the lessons this project has taught me, I learned sustained inquiry into one or more aspects of first generation immigrant culture by an outsider is in itself of no small significance to the community. Although my original intention was to remain low-key in search of information and perspectives, I soon found my endeavor widely advertised by word of mouth and my presence officially and publicly sanctioned by the local community of monks. Each time I attended a Buddhist festival, generally held in the Lithuanian-American Club on Smith Street in Providence, the abbot immediately would announce my arrival over the enormous loudspeakers, then begin to list my professional qualifications, life experiences, and personal qualities, all of which functioned as a key to acceptance with the community.

Questions such as "Why are you interested in Buddhism?" "Do you like *lam* (laughter)?" "Can you eat sticky rice?" were often asked of me at community gatherings and in homes, and my attempts at clear and honest answers duly noted. I feel that the interest and support of the monks was not so much because they may have wished me success in my pursuit of an academic degree, or because they expected, as a community, that my work would lead directly to new social and educational programs. Rather, I believe my inquiry was perceived to have been of significance to the monks and community elders because it supported their interest in maintaining connections with the past, specifically Lao history and cultural traditions. Thus, in a community which feels generally misunderstood and neglected, an informed collaborative inquiry that seeks connections with the past, as long as it is carried out in a culturally sensitive, non-exploitative manner, creates its own positive momentum.

Another level of significance may be that the issue identification and reflection process within a small network of participants presents evidence that leads to more complete understanding by outsiders of certain issues as perceived from within. As Kenneth King has put it, there can be a "complementarity between quantitative and qualitative approaches" (1989:152) which can benefit both. Identification and in-depth understanding of issues at the local level can become part of larger scale, official data collection instruments covering a much larger sample, and in the end help shape educational policy.

In addition, the experience gained by carrying out the action research process as described in Chapter 7 may be of use to those who wish to explore either this or other aspects of Lao community life. The ethnography of a Lao community in Illinois by Srila Sen (1987) was particularly helpful to me in this regard, as was the personal perspective recorded by Ross Kidd on theatre-for-development in Zimbabwe. While the intention is not to present a set of prescriptive measures for doing research in a Lao refugee community, it is helpful to be aware of specific problems and pitfalls.

Finally, this study may be of significance for others interested in the general history and educational aspects of *lam*. The overview of its educational aspects presented in

Chapter 5 from the sources on its linguistic and musical qualities, together with other less comprehensive studies and observations, may be well of significance to integrated development projects with the Lao in Southeast Asia, or with community education in Lao communities in the West. Similarly, the process description and recommendations presented in Chapters 7 and 8 may help inform other studies of folk drama either in their place of origin or in immigrant communities abroad.

CHAPTER II

SINGERS AND DANCERS OF TALES

Folk Drama as Educational Media

Moh lam and *moh khaen*, the performers of folk opera in modern Laos, northeastern Thailand, and in immigrant communities in the West are the descendents of a rich oral tradition that predates recorded history of the Lao. As such, they belong to a contemporary league of artists who share with them highly developed skills in improvisation and musical performance which serve to preserve and promote particular aspects of their local cultures. The purpose of this chapter is to identify the characteristics of these artists and their audiences as participans in the creation of learning media, and to present three parallel examples of the application of traditional media for modern purposes.

What is Educational Media?

Narrow definitions of educational media and its alternative term, instructional technology, tend to limit research paradigms in education by restricting inquiry to mechanistic studies of equipment, materials, and procedures currently favored by university departments of education, industrial training programs, and public school systems in privileged areas of the industrialized world. While these definitions may serve the purposes of their own context, the frames of reference they establish often lay wider claims to truth, much in the same way modern science subsumes or discredits traditional and local systems of knowledge.

The study of folk drama as educational media is necessarily based in a much broader, more inclusive definition. Lao folk drama developed independently in a world that until quite recently had escaped significant contact with Western educational systems and modern communications technologies. However, its function as an educational communications medium as well as a form of artistic expression in Lao culture has always been, and remains, significant

There are clear and useful connections between Lao folk opera and the many rich theatrical and musical traditions elsewhere in the world which have assumed educational roles, and in many cases have brought about social and political change. Theatre in general, and folk drama in particular, therefore qualify as some of the oldest and most influential forms of educational media in existence. The popular origins of folk theatre, moreover, make it a by nature a participatory medium that is performed and received by people from within the same social and economic class using the same dialect and portraying a similar world view.

Dictionary definitions of "medium" that come closest to specifying the educational role of the performing arts are those that mention "artistic expression" and "instrumentality" in human communications.[1] If we add the phrase "promotes human learning" to the popular definition, both the visual and performing arts which either directly or indirectly affect human learning occupy a central role as the educational media of a given society. Each of the materials and tools used in the creation, performance, or delivery to an audience is also a medium, both as itself and as part of the total process.

A recent definition from the field of communications theory extends, rather than limits, more conventional views:

> A *medium*...is what transforms experience into knowledge. Or, as we might put it in other words, media (it is a plural word) provide the signs which give meaning to the events of everyday life. (Inglis 1990:3)

Accordingly, if every thing and event which changes raw experience into knowledge may be called media, all media is by definition educational. The degree of intentionality in their making and subsequent or coincidental effects forms certain lines of distinction, but selection of the types of media which are validated as worthwhile is made on the basis of how they fit into the larger framework of educational and social theory.

From the adult education perspective, the absolute necessity of maintaining the validity of many voices and many modes of expression has been addressed by both educators and media theorists. Ovando (1979) has argued that the purpose of lifelong education in a multicultural society is the creation of a learning society in which learning content, process, and style "need to be articulated with the individual's role as culture maker in mind" (1979:152). In such an ideal society, cultural values and individual voices are preserved through internal encouragement and external validation, resisting domination by institutionalized concepts of learning and learning media.

From a media production point of view, Tomas Ybarra-Fausto (1992) asserts that the creation of a wider community connected by intercultural understanding is not so simple. As the economic forces that foster cultural homogenization increase both locally and globally, media-makers must seek to establish "an expanded social and aesthetic frame" in which "interests are culturally mediated, replaced, created, and recreated through what is collectively valued" (Ybarra-Fausto 1992:8). Such a framework should be fluid, open-ended, and seek to establish continuity between past, present, and future concepts of what media is and what it can become.

The Oral Tradition

In rural Southeast Asia, the performing arts include such genre as story-telling, oral poetry, drama, puppetry, dance, instrumental music, and song. Modern forms of folk drama undoubtedly evolved from the art of the story-teller, which in preliterate or "primary oral" (Ong 1982) were based on the composition of narrative oral poetry, and to a lesser extent on music and dance. As Lord (1965) and Sweeney (1991) have pointed out, the role of traditional story-tellers in primary oral societies was central to maintaining the common understanding and recollection of history. Thus the teller of tales more than an entertainer:

> In such a (primary oral) society, the storyteller is a central figure, for the verbal storage of cultural information tends in large part to take the form of the narrative. The teller is thus no mere entertainer or literary artist; he is scholar, jurist, and custodian of the traditions of his society. (Sweeney 1991:22)

Ong (1982) and Tannen (1980) have described the connection between orality and literacy in terms of a continuum from primary oral cultures to cultures in which writing systems plays a key role in the way knowledge is acquired, organized, and disseminated. Keeping in mind that the descriptive terms indicate major trends without necessarily excluding each other, Ong's categories provide useful ways of thinking about the complex interaction of orality and literacy in a given culture. Table 1 on the next page describes the main features of these categories in terms of the way communications are produced, performed, and transmitted with respect to the tools involved in each process and their delivery mode to the readership or audience.

As Ong points out, all language is overwhelmingly oral. Of the many thousands of spoken languages known to exist in course of human history, only 106 have produced written literatures (Ong 1982:7). Of those societies which have developed writing systems, all began as primary oral cultures, and many are believed to have developed complex knowledge systems without the benefits of literacy.

Table 1
Categories of Media Production and Delivery Systems

	Primary Oral	Manuscript	Print	Electronic
Production	immediate	delayed	delayed (less time lapse)	immediate or delayed
Performance	live unscripted	oral group reading	silent reading	live or recorded*
Transmission	direct, immediate	indirect via specialist	direct but distant	direct but distant
Tools	mnemonic patterning	stylus, pen, palm leaf, etc.	moveable type	radio, tv, video, etc.
Audience	group	group or individual	individual	group or individual

* may be scripted or unscripted (the live event), but subject to technical limitations such as time, visual dimensionality, audio duplication.

Source: Adapted from Walter Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (New York: Routledge, 1982)

In the primary oral culture of pre-Buddhist Lao settlements in the Mekong Valley, it is reasonable to assume that performances of *lam* were spontaneously composed and that the *moh lam,* as the oral specialist, occupied a position not unlike the *griots* of West Africa, who acted as "storytellers, clowns, genealogists, musicians, and oral reporters" (Yasin 1992:4). Spontaneous composition of *lam* by non-specialists, for the purpose of courtship or informal entertainment has also been documented in the observations of European travelers to Laos at the turn of the century (d'Orleans 1894;

Le Boulanger 1889; Reinach 1907) and reminiscences by Lao refugees in America.[2]

In a primary oral culture, thinking must be done in "mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence." (Ong 1982:34). As Havelock points out in Preface to Plato (1971), it was the use of formulary devices, including mnemonic patterning, which gave rise to the stylized language of the Homeric oral tradition: In this as well as in other traditions, it is this "oral enclave of contrived speech" (Havelock 1971:41) that sets this language apart from the vernacular and thereby becomes capable of transmitting and preserving its history through distinct, aesthetically valued thought forms and frequently repeated themes.

In a later work (1986), Havelock gives further clues to the origin of the performance styles demonstrated by folk dramatists. In primary oral societies, Havelock proposes that repetition and rhythm, "arguably the foundation of biological pleasures" (Havelock 1986:72), were keys to the successful storing of cultural information. The specialized language of the oral tradition began as speech set to rhythm, accompanied by hand-clapping or drums:

> This supplied what was automatically repeatable, the monotonous element in a recurring cadence created by correspondences in the purely acoustic values of the language as pronounced, regardless of meaning...such was the birth of what we call poetry originally the functional instrument of storage of cultural information for re-use or, in more familiar language, the instrument for the establishment of a cultural tradition. (Havelock 1986:71)

In other words, associating language with rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, melody, and physical movement made it easier to memorize and more pleasurable to perform. Buddhist chanting, recitation of verses from the Koran, the incantation of oral formulas in the propitiation of spirits, and African-American worksongs are but a few examples of the strong association between rhythm, melodic patterning, and oral memory.

The spread of Therevada Buddhism imported from the Khmer empire of Angkor throughout the Lao village network in the 14th century A.D. had the effect of gradually moving the society away from primary orality. Literacy in the language of the Buddhist *dhamma*[3] was a central feature of training for the monkhood, and the copying of religious manuscripts a primary activity. In oral manuscript cultures, writing systems exist primarily for the preservation of records and oral texts (Ong 1982; Sweeney 1991). The introduction and spread of a writing system throughout the Lao village network by Therevada Buddhist monks was originally for this purpose, and remained so for some five hundred years.

As in other oral manuscript cultures, literacy in pre-colonial Laos was the domain of a small group of literate specialists who were either lifelong monks or had received training at the village *wat*. Ong theorizes that in such cultures, the role of the storyteller is significantly diminished (Goody and Watt 1968; Ong, 1982), but whether this was happening prior to the arrival of Western influences in the region is open to speculation.

The introduction of print literacy into the societies of South and Southeast Asia had far-reaching and controversial effects, which some scholars have argued were detrimental to the oral traditions of these cultures. Others (Goody 1968; Sweeney 1991) concur that orality retains a vital role in the preservation of local knowledge and culture vitality among the peoples of these regions who have minimal access to or interest in literacy.

In his introduction to Literacy in Traditional Societies, Goody (1968) pointed out that in societies which persist in valuing the oral tradition, literacy is seen as an aid to oral memory. Books and manuscripts are highly regarded, even venerated, but not as highly as the words of a mediator or respected teacher. Thus communal access to written knowledge is available, individual literacy is not seen as a priority. In these societies, performers of the oral tradition may still flourish, but their role may have been significantly reduced.

The introduction of what Sweeney (1991) terms "colonial print literacy" in Southeast Asia, along with European languages and school systems, tended to have a corrosive effect on the oral traditions with which it came in contact. Mass literacy came to be viewed as the key to achieving the technical knowledge and material affluence represented by the West, while orality was associated with a life that was "primitive," poor, and economically underdeveloped.

The domination of print literacy has, however, been far from complete. Even in the most Westernized societies of modern Southeast Asia, mass-produced print media have not replaced oral modes, and local approaches to written composition remain dominated by traditionally oral thought patterns. Writing about the interaction between print literacy and Malay oral tradition, Sweeney emphasizes that changes have been gradual:

> The erosion of this enclave (that of the oral specialist) is not necessarily an indication of a radical change in the general state of mind of a society. Thus, in the Malay world, while the role of the oral specialist became gradually more peripheral, the oral thought processes reflected in his principles of composition survived to varying degrees in written composition...(1991:21)

The role of literacy in industrial societies deeply influenced by print is much more central, but is currently undergoing radical redefinition, partly as a result of nonprint communications media. One distinction from primary oral societies, however, is that written scripts, outlines, and notes replace the old mnemonic patterning of traditional oral specialists, thus altering both the content and style of the delivery.

The use of electronic media to instantaneously transmit oral communication over immense distances would seem to signal new possibilities for the renewal of traditional orality. However, as Ong (1982) and Havelock (1986) are quick to point out, these new media rely heavily on literacy for their very being, as well as for the programming and processing of their messages:

> The electronic transformation of verbal expression has both deepened the commitment of the word to space initiated by writing and intensified by print and has brought consciousness to a new age of secondary orality. (Ong 1982:135)

There are, Ong acknowledges, similarities between the worlds of primary and secondary orality. Electronic media are capable of replicating the "participatory mystique," the "fostering of a communal sense, the "concentration on the present moment" (Ong 1982:136) ascribed to primary oral communication. However, continues Ong, "It is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print, which are essential for the manufacture and operation of the equipment and for its use as well" (Ong 1982:136). Thus, while the bards and story tellers in the world's remaining primary oral societies could without doubt perform in front of lights, cameras, and microphones, their performance is likely to be affected by the absence of a spontaneous audience and the very presence of the equipment.

Furthermore, purely oral performers are not likely to have access to control over the production or its distribution. However, as witnessed in the revival of ethnic theatre, story-telling, and dance in the United States, it is possible for artists who are part of the technological, literate society of the West to reconnect to an oral past, and in this way to play in important role in the maintenance of community among disenfranchised minority cultures. The importance of rap music in this regard are pointed out by Jon Yasin:

> Because the majority of rap artists are African-American males, one of the most disenfranchised oppressed groups in society...this music form communicates much of that oppression as well as strategies to overcome that oppression, which include education, working together as an ethnic group to achieve unity, and positive support of members of the African diaspora. (1992:30)

The ability of purely oral traditions to survive in societies heavily influenced by literacy seems to depend on their relationship with both print and electronic media as well as on the willingness of the society to maintain them. The study of Yugoslav folk epics begun by Milton Parry in 1935 and completed by Albert Lord in 1965, The Singer of Tales, is unique in its detailed description of an oral performance medium that had managed to retain its vitality in both Muslim and Christian communities.

The dilemma faced by members of ethnic communities with strong oral traditions in America is whether their struggle to acquire the essay-text literacy skills necessary to their survival in the larger societal context will mean the demise of their own ways of knowing. Can an individual function simultaneously at both ends of the oral-literate continuum? Could the power of the written word actually be harnessed to revitalize the power of oral composition, to resist further erosion of the enclave? These questions are important extensions of the general issues of bilingualism and biculturalism that must be addressed in the creation of a new agenda for lifelong learning.

Learning in Traditional Societies

In terms of Ong and Tannen oral-literate continuum, Lao village culture fits neatly within the description of a manuscript oral society which has maintained a strong oral tradition, which suggests that learning preferences and styles among the Lao are primarily oral, even though literacy may be highly valued. In addition to the literature on orality by communications theorists and linguists, the work of psychologist Howard Gardner (1983) in developing the theory of multiple intelligences challenges the notion that unschooled individuals from primary oral or manuscript oral cultures are without knowledge or skills. Rather than attempting to measure intelligence using monocultural constructs, Gardner suggests studying the processes used in the acquisition and transfer of knowledge. Gardner's framework selects three cultural settings as examples of how types of learning are facilitated in terms of intelligences tapped, the media of transmission, the place, and the mediators or agents of learning. Although the framework uses literacy as a key descriptor, this is not meant to imply that literacy is necessary or desirable in all cultural contexts.

Table 2

Framework for Analyzing Educational Processes as Applied to Three Cultural Settings

Component of Education	*Specialized Skill in Nonliterate Society*	*Literacy in Traditional Religious School*	*Scientific Curriculum in Modern Secular School*
Examples	Pulawat sailing Yugoslavian oral verse	Koranic School Hindu gurukala Hebrew school Buddhist temple	Elementary & Secondary Schools in N.A. Japan; Microcomputer programming
Intelligences	Linguistic,Musical Spatial Bodily-kinesthetic Interpersonal	Linguistic Interpersonal Logical-mathematical	Logical-mathematical Intrapersonal Linguistic
Media of Transmission	Direct observation; Some oral instruction	Oral verse, manuscripts	Great variety, including books,charts, computers, films, etc.
Locus of learning	On site	Separate building or inside temple, mosque	Separate building Home study
Agents Who Transmit Knowledge	Skilled elders, typically relatives	Individuals trained in literacy& argument	Individuals with specialized training

Source: Adapted from Howard Gardner, Frames of Mind (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 338.

In view of the village learning systems in traditional Southeast Asian societies, (Nash 1966; Tambiah 1968), the intelligences, media of transmission, loci of learning, and the agents who transmit knowledge included aspects of primary oral (nonliterate) and traditional religious school (manuscript oral) learning environments. In reference to learning in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, Goody points out that the spoken words of the *guru* (*khru* in Lao, Thai, and Khmer) are venerated over the written word. In this tradition,"truth" requires a mediator so that it can be duly contemplated and internalized (Goody 1967:5), not simply stored for later recall and application.

In societies where literacy is a specialized skill reserved for the preservation and public performance of religious texts in manuscript form, the acquisition of the knowledge base necessary to survival and growth is primarily oral. On the one hand, literacy training is available to those who elect(or are chosen) to become specialists in the recording, copying, and incantation of the texts. On the other, there is the much larger realm of nonformal and informal acquisition of practical knowledge and skills. In neither case are the texts simply read for pleasure or studied for information. Language being primarily oral, the idea of learning to speak by studying a book is as absurd as learning to swim by studying the sky.

Another major feature of learning in societies with strong oral traditions, according to linguist Deborah Tannen, is the "common sense reference to truth" (Tannen 1980:327). Thought has a closer reference to the world of experience than it does in highly literate societies where "thought is analytical, sequential, linear." (Tannen 1980:327) In oral societies, moreover, knowledge is shared in the communal learning experience, whereas in the literate world knowledge is decontextualized and separated into private learning acts.

Features of Folk Drama

In the term "folk drama," "folk" simply describes performers and performances that are intended for and available to ordinary people, which is generally to say those who are not members of the ruling class or the economic elite. In the traditional agrarian societies of South and Southeast Asia, these "ordinary folk" were primarily rural people living in village networks outside the political and economic power centers, with little access to colonial education systems or the strictly classical forms of literature and the performing arts.

Drama is often distinguished from other media by the emotional power it derives from the dynamic creation of symbolic action, the effect being to create visions through which representations not only of immediate reality but also of potential reality can be recognized. This allows extraordinary visions of past, present and future to be explored by ordinary people who may or may not have access to the technology of literacy. These visions, moreover, are often "deeply implicated in the cyclical repetitive view of social process," (Turner 1974:16) which give them the capacity for bringing about both personal and social change.

As an example of the power of folk drama in a manuscript oral culture, folk drama in pre-colonial rural India is given credit for having popularized certain religious cults and increased their following more effectively than any other means of proselytizing:

> It is no exaggeration to claim that it is the folk forms of art-including the drama- in temples and villages that perpetuated the cult of Bhakti among the common people (9-16th centuries). These were the media of mass communication. Bhagwat cult managed effectively to use audiovisual media - folk drama, poetry, puppetry, and thus got seated in the hearts of the people (Mathur 1964:76)

One of the factors that sets folk drama apart from other types of theatre is that it is not rigidly scripted or directed. While there may be a written script or pre-arranged story line, as in the case of modern *lam*, the written guide generously allows for improvisation by individual artists within the boundaries of the poetic and musical style. Therefore, no two live performances of a folk drama are exactly alike, because as part of the oral tradition of a particular society, its use of language emphasizes "shared knowledge" between the performers and the audience. Folk drama is far more responsive to audience reaction than is classical drama or modern urban theatre. If the play does not please the audience, they may interrupt, hurl objects, or simply walk away. It is, in fact, a test of the performer's skill to keep an audience attentive and content (Lord 1965:21).

Folk drama, like other performing arts and games, tends to be composed collectively rather than individually. Their content tends to be based on a kind of repetitive recycling of popular wisdom, on calendrical events, or crises in social processes intended to lead to critical awareness of a common experience.

In contrast to popular performing arts which have proliferated in the agricultural village networks of Southeast Asia since their early settlement, the ritual performances of drama, music, dance, and puppetry which evolved in the royal courts of the powerful city-states were relatively static. The most comprehensive study of the classical performing arts in the power center of a society heavily influenced by Brahmanic myth and ritual is Clifford Geertz' Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali (1980). According to Geertz, the Sanskrit word *negara* in its broadest sense means "civilization...the traditional city, and the high culture that city supported" as opposed to the world of the countryside, thus separating the world of political and moral authority from that of the governed. Thus the purpose of the royal drama was to reinforce the "ruling obsessions of Balinese culture," not to criticize or change it:

> It was a theatre state in which the kings and princes were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience. (Geertz 1980:13)

There are few first-hand accounts of the classical performing arts in the former city-states of Laos other than brief anecdotal sketches by 19th century travelers. However, the description and analysis of three annual cultic festivals in early 20th century Luang Prabang by Frank Reynolds offers insights into these royal dramatic rituals which suggest comparison with *negara*. These performances depicted mythic episodes in the sacred history of the city (Reynolds 1978:167) in spectacles designed to reinforce the social, political, and religious hierarchy and therefore solidify the Lao ethnic and national identity. Having persisted since the period in which Luang Prabang was the center of the powerful kingdom of Lan Xang (1315-1550), Reynolds argues that these ideals had, until their disruption by foreign intervention, maintained a strong sense of continuity with the Lao past.

What both studies conclude about the function of state-sponsored drama in Southeast Asian societies is that the rulers spared no expense to demonstrate through the performing arts that the order imposed by the rulers was indeed the one favored by heaven, and was therefore reflective of the cosmos. While these highly ritualized performances communicated clear messages to ordinary people, they did not originate among them. Their communicative purpose was, like modern religious pageants, the teaching of a prescribed dogma and the establishment of a moral order. Any changes in the performance rituals were carefully considered and approved by political and religious authorities.

Popular theatre or folk drama suffers no such restraints. It can be restructured or reoriented on the spot, depending on performers' skill and audience reactions. Like the storytellers who preceded them, performers of folk drama also rely heavily on mnemonics in order to recall and compose their oral expression as they perform.

Speech patterns used in the Lao folk opera are exclusively rhythmic and follow set rules of versification and melody. The use of the word "opera" in describing this form of folk drama indicates in strong reliance on melody; it is mostly sung rather than spoken, with unbroken accompaniment by one or more musical instruments.

Another feature of folk drama in general is its lack of what educated urban audiences might see as sophistication. It can, in other words, entertain without inhibition (Mathur 1964: 83). Lao folk opera is known for its often bawdy lyrics and explicit sexual references in an otherwise modest social context. Mathur comments that Indian folk drama can be "outrageously melodramatic" or forthrightly polemic in its message, rendering it too direct and simplistic for sophisticated audiences. Its lack of subtlety may also be the quality which makes folk drama vulnerable to co-optation by external interests.

> ...it can preach and sermonize without reservation. It is aware of its validity as a social instrument and realizes that it can subsist only as long as it not only entertains but also tries to uplift society.(Mathur 1964:83)

Each of the features that distinguish folk drama from other forms of the performing arts applies to the Lao Folk Opera popular in all of its present forms. Changes resulting from the modernization of society in northeastern Thailand and the complete upheaval and resettlement of a formerly rural population in urban America are, however, clearly evident. These changes notwithstanding, the four main elements and Lao folk opera remain its unique style of oral poetry, music, and dance. The primary element is the style of sung poetry (*lam*) in which the performers communicate both with each other and with the audience. As with other forms of dramatic arts, the roots of *lam* are found in ancient traditions of spontaneously composed oral narrative poetry which existed long before the invention of writing systems (Lord 1965:10).

Having accompanied the spread of popular Buddhism throughout rural Lao society beginning in the early 14th century, the introduction a writing system for the preservation of religious and scientific texts was a relatively recent event. At that point, the primary oral society of the lowland Lao began a gradual shift toward an oral manuscript culture, in which literacy was the domain of religious specialists and was used mainly for the preservation of sacred texts (Tambiah 1968). As with Buddhism itself, this type of literacy deeply influenced Lao culture, including its art forms, but did not significantly alter the basic world view or life style of the ordinary villager, whose modes of communication remained primarily oral. Nor did this type of literacy significantly diminish the role of the *moh lam*, the singer and dancer of tales. In fact, there is probably a stronger case for the influence of Buddhist manuscript literacy having been a mutually supportive, enriching one through the interaction between the popular oral specialist and the literate community of monks.

Folk drama traditions in the Western world persist in the familiar forms of improvisational theatre, oral poetry, puppetry, community theatre, and the various forms of drama used to teach or raise awareness in a variety of educational settings. However, like the delivery of speeches and sermons, dramatic productions have been forever altered by the presence of literacy. In American cities, a theatrical tradition grounded in the diverse cultures, languages, and experiences of successive waves of immigrants had flourished since the late nineteenth century in a variety of forms (McConachie & Friedman 1985) until radio and television preempted live theatre as a popular medium generally accessible to working class audiences. Native American and African-American cultures have also maintained vibrant oral traditions, evading erosion by retaining their integrity outside mainstream performance contexts.

Transmissions of oral communication via electronic media are affected both by the restrictions and the capabilities of evolving technologies. As the with oral delivery of scripted speeches and plays, broadcast and recording events do not exist in a vacuum separate from print, but have a special relationship with it which, along with the several other factors, distinguishes it from the live performance context of traditional folk drama. Most such events are scripted in some way, have definite time restrictions, and are produced using technology dependent on print for its design, assembly and operation. In this way, as Havelock asserts, "Beside and below the acoustic message there still lurks the written message" (1986:33).

Perhaps of greater significance is the fact that although electronic media have the capacity to reproduce oral performances, they do not facilitate immediate, two-way communication between performer and audience, therefore eliminating much of the improvisational, responsive nature of traditional folk drama. Ong theorizes that because the recording artist's audience is distant, a fictional audience must be conjured up (Ong 1982:177), the relationship is in this way much like that between writer and imagined reader. The television production format that incorporates the studio audience as active participants offers one solution to the distance dilemma, yet it may be argued creates an even further space between performer(s) and the television audience by relegating the latter to a secondary role.

The challenge for both live and recorded performance media which seeks to maintain vitality as folk drama in the age of literacy and electronic media is to recover traditional forms and to experiment with new ways of allowing them to interact with new technology yet preserve their integrity as folk arts. In many ways, to insist on the purity of these media is to deny the very flexibility which distinguishes them from the more static forms of traditional drama, and in so doing to insure their eventual demise.

The challenge for modern artists and educators who seek to use folk arts to promote the concept of a lifelong learning society in which individuals can participate more fully in the reconstruction of their own cultural identities, is to find connections among the languages and art forms of diverse communities that will encourage more effective as well as more equitable learning strategies.

Folk Drama in Action: Three Examples

Each of the three examples described in this section demonstrates a similarity to Lao folk opera in form, purpose, or potential purpose. All three may be classified as folk drama as defined above in terms of their performance style and audience. Each has the quality of being able to juxtapose comedy with serious matters, to entertain as it educates. The descriptions are presented in order of their flexibility as participatory, improvisational media, which coincides with the structure of the oral-literate continuum as applied to their respective cultural contexts. The more influenced by industrial print literacy, the more tightly controlled the drama and the less participatory the role of the audience. Table 3 on the next page summarizes the relationship of audience participation in terms of participatory versus receptive roles to the oral-literate continuum as exemplified in various artistic forms, both traditional and modern. Also shown is the degree of written scripting and authoritative performance control or theatrical direction, from spontaneous or unscripted performances through the tightness of scripting and direction imposed by broadcast television.

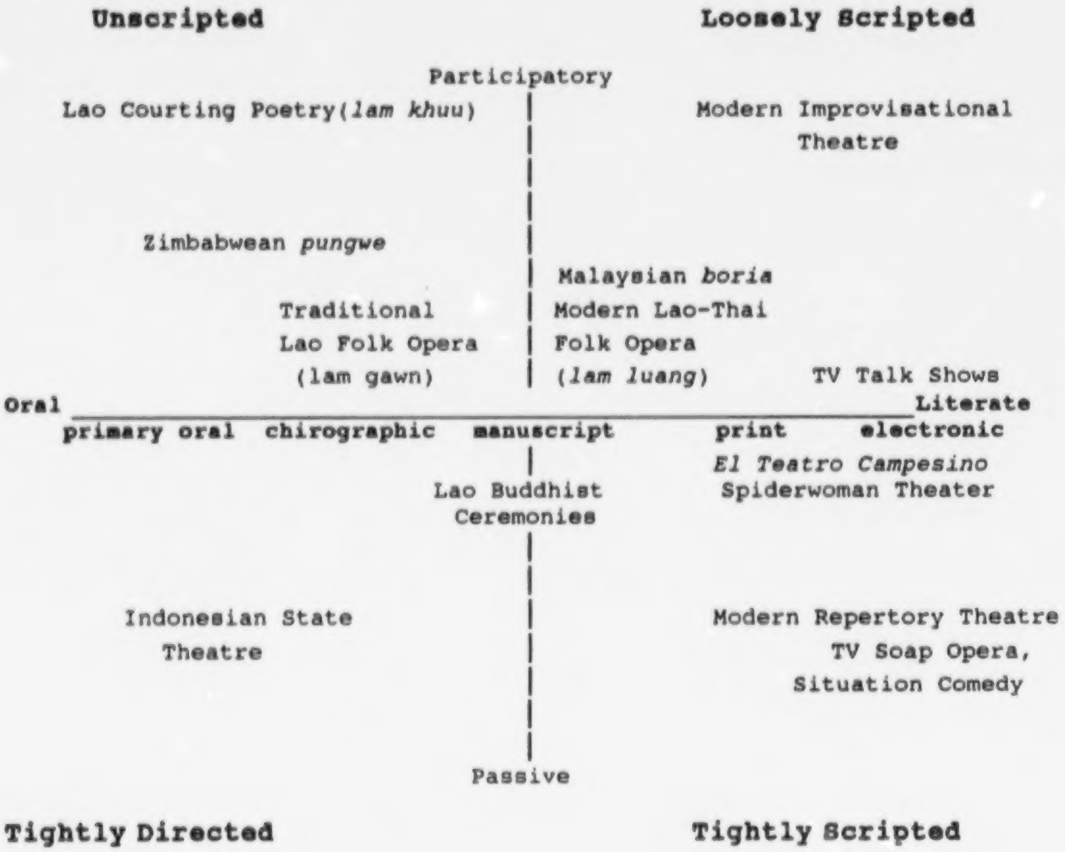
Unscripted
Loosely Scripted
Participatory
Lao Courting Poetry(*lam khuu*)
Modern Improvisational Theatre
Zimbabwean *pungwe*
Malaysian *boria*
Traditional Lao Folk Opera (lam gawn)
Modern Lao-Thai Folk Opera (*lam luang*)
TV Talk Shows
Oral
Literate
primary oral
chirographic
manuscript
print
electronic
El Teatro Campesino
Spiderwoman Theater
Lao Buddhist Ceremonies
Indonesian State Theatre
Modern Repertory Theatre
TV Soap Opera, Situation Comedy
Passive
Tightly Directed
Tightly Scripted

Figure 1

Examples of Performance Media in Relation to Degree of Audience Participation and to the Oral-Literate Continuum

The examples of folk drama also vary in the type and degree of external support and control from outside agencies. That is, each one is to some degree an educational medium with a political message calling either directly or indirectly for economic and social reform. The style, documentation method, and purpose of each case study also differs, demonstrating the variety of academic disciplines and research paradigms involved in the study of folk drama in all of its many forms.

Pungwe in Zimbabwe

This description is based on a first-hand account by Ross Kidd (1984) of a theatre workshop held in Zimbabwe in August, 1983. The workshop was part of a pan-African "theatre-for-development" workshop involving popular theatre workers in 19 African countries. The report is "one person's impressions" of the Zimbabwe workshop, which was a joint project of UNESCO, the International Theatre Institute, and the Zimbabwe Government. The event also received support from a number of additional agencies, including the Canadian International Development Agency, the International Council for Adult Education, and the Swedish International Development Authority.

The purpose of the workshop was to train development workers in the use of participatory theatre to help build a socialist society following independence from Britain (1965) and the political defeat of the white minority government by former ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) guerilla leader Robert Mugabe. As the title of the report (From People's Theatre for Revolution to Popular Theatre for Reconstruction) suggests, theatre had been used extensively as a motivational medium during the guerilla movement, and was now to be harnessed, with government support, for peaceful development purposes. To borrow the rhetoric of the workshop participants, the general purpose was "mobilization and conscientization of the masses" (Kidd 1984:1) which was distinguished from revolutionary liberation theatre in that the latter had been instrumental in "activating, politicizing, and boosting the morale of peasants" (Kidd 1984:1) during their long struggle for self-determination.

Thus while both types of theatre were directed toward motivating rural people to take action in the shaping of their own destinies, the goals were quite different: the first was a call to armed resistance and the second was part of a long term effort which called upon villagers to participate in the construction of a new society. Thus its methods, which were directed toward the revitalization of local culture through the revival of a performing art, were less dogmatic.

The Zimbabwe workshop drew on the experience of people who had been involved with liberation theatre, which had in turn been heavily influenced by traditional performing arts. It also borrowed from the experience of parallel theatre-for-development efforts in other independent African countries. These activities had, in turn, evolved from experiments carried out by colonial governments or neo-colonial development agencies to use indigenous folk drama to communicate such themes as such cash crop production, immunization, literacy, and sanitation.[4]

In contrast to these types of theatre-for-development activities, which were essentially top-down, the Zimbabwe workshop sought to develop with a new approach which would involve villagers as active participants at every stage of the process:

> Bringing people together on a single occasion to see and discuss socio-drama could not in itself create the organizational capacity for community mobilization...A new approach was needed if the work was to become participatory, critical,and a catalyst for collective action. (Kidd 1984:6)

With the participatory nature of this form of popular theatre made clear the outset, the workshop participants were encouraged to shift roles from that of performer to that of "animateur," a facilitator of the dramatization and analysis process in collaboration with villagers This process called upon villagers to identify their own issues, transform them into improvisational performing art, and then organize to seek solutions.

> The process created a much more critical perspective, revealing the political-economic roots of the villagers' poverty, landlessness, and unemployment. It clarified some of the possibilities for action and brought out potential constraints on each course of action. It also conscientized the development workers, getting them to work with rather than for the villagers, challenging their developmentalist assumptions and technocratic conditioning. (Kidd 1984:7)

The folk drama format used most frequently during the course of the Zimbabwe workshop was the indigenous art form called *pungwe*, an eclectic, loosely organized pre-colonial village gathering for the exchange of dances, songs, and improvisational drama. Having also provided the artistic and cultural setting for liberation drama, the *pungwe* proved to be a popular, even infectious, means of adapting folk drama to an educational process in that the villagers were enthusiastic and capable participants. It successfully provided the stage for education and entertainment to be combined through traditional medium focusing on serious issues of immediate concern.

In terms of the oral-literate continuum, the context of this performance medium is a primary oral (Shona-speaking) society which has come into contact with colonial print literacy through Christian missionary efforts and the government school system. The role of literacy and numeracy in the village was limited to the measurement of produce, and schooling was seen as a means to possible individual success in the towns. However, the detrimental effects of the formal educational system on village life was also recognized and identified as a problem. The primary orality of village society and its artistic expression through the *pungwe* provided an ideal context for participatory theatre in that the medium was already a natural, legitimate style of oral expression. Collaboration and support on the part of the development workers had the effect of providing support and introducing contemporary themes. As the workshop participants concluded, "theatre was already in the villages...people already had the interest, enthusiasm, and basic skills. All that was needed was encouragement, stimulation, and support."

While the specifics of the political goals, issues, and educational outcomes are unique to the Zimbabwe workshop, the process that evolved during the course of the workshop holds valuable lessons for the facilitation of folk drama in widely divergent contexts. This process, as summarized below, provided the basic structure for the action research project with the Lao-American community in New England described in Chapter 7.

- build a relationship with community members
- work with community members to study their situation and identify issues for in-depth analysis
- learn the indigenous forms of cultural expression and explore how they can be used as educational media
- explore ways of deepening understanding the issues through these media
- organize performances and discussions
- collaborate with villagers on ways the performances and discussions can be followed up
- evaluate the experience and draw out the lessons learned

(Kidd 1984:17)

In their reflections on this process, both villagers and workshop participants realized the power of theatre as a unifying and organizing educational medium. Among the criticisms, villagers asked for an even greater creative hand with less dominance by the development team. In his final analysis, Kidd concurs that one of the lessons learned from the workshop was the need for maintaining balance between "pushing thinking forward" and "building popular control."

(Kidd 1984:73). In other words, the use of a popular folk medium like the *pungwe* for development purposes may endanger its integrity as a traditional form of cultural expression over which the people have internal control. Initiators of this type of educational theatre must, therefore, be sensitive, patient, and willing to acknowledge the capacity of the *pungwe* to simultaneously entertain, captivate, and celebrate as well as to politicize and teach.

Boria in Malaysia

Like Zimbabwe, Malaysia is a former British colony with a population made up of indigenous (Malays, Dayaks, Dasuns) and immigrant (Chinese, Indian, Eurasian) peoples. As in Zimbabwe, there exists as part of the colonial legacy great economic and social discrepancy between the rural indigenous peoples and the more prosperous immigrants, who have been instrumental in the growth of Malaysia's predominantly market economy. Since its formation as an independent federation of states in 1963, the Malaysian national government has sought to maintain the balance between political unity and cultural diversity (Bujang 1987:viii) in an effort to overcome periodic outbreaks racial and ethnic violence. Following such an outbreak in 1969, there was an immediate pressure to "seriously consider the state of the society as a whole and its future as a multi-ethnic nation" (Bujang 1987:ix) This led to a set of guiding principles aimed at improving political, economic, social, and cultural relationships, which in turn led to active government support of the *Boria*, a form of folk drama popular among the ethnic Malay.

Unlike the *pungwe*, *boria* had maintained its popularity and vitality as a popular performing art throughout British colonial rule. Its support from the national government as a valuable form of Malay cultural expression has given rise to new functions and modified forms, much like the Lao folk opera in northeastern Thailand (Brandon 1967; Miller 1982).

The study of *boria* by Rahmah Bujang of the University of Malaya differs from the diary-style reporting of Ross Kidd in three important ways. First, Bujang's report is a formal ethnography based on the research methods of social anthropology; secondly, its intended reading audience is academic; its conceptual framework is expressed in the language of the social scientist, as opposed to that of the popular theatre activist, although the register of the author's voice becomes less formal as she discusses performance details and reports on her personal interviews with performers. A third important distinction is that the subject of Bujang's research is an existing artistic and cultural phenomenon, not the creation or revival of a form of cultural expression that had been all but destroyed during colonization.

As a performance medium, *boria* is a combination of comic sketches, dancing, and music. In a typical *boria*, the dramatic action by a set of stock actors is followed by a musical commentary on the theme by an oral composer (*tukang* *karang)* backed up by a chorus line and musical accompaniment. The dramatic episodes are acted out in the Penang Malay dialect, and the *tukang karang* performs in sung verse, with the chorus joining in on the refrain. These oral compositions usually comment and moralize on the theme presented in the dramatic sketch, with direct admonitions to the audience, such as these excerpts from a *boria* on the theme of western cultural influence on Malaysian youth.

> For to follow the example
> Of the westerners in their modernity
> There is no need to comb or clean
> Till all their bodies have a fetid smell
>
> Young man start to sport long hair
> Young woman in miniskirts almost naked
> Leading a life of happy bachelorhood
> With behavior wild as the stag
>
> To keep with the times in science and technology
> They are willing to eat anything laid out
> Many know not how to acknowledge God or pray
> Branding the religious teachers as antiquated
>
> Train your child properly
> Give them knowledge fundamental
> When they grow up it will build
> A life that is not miserable for them
>
> (Bujang 1987:135-137)

Boria troupes are hired to perform at weddings, state celebrations, and religious celebrations. Small wooded stages are constructed for the purpose of *boria* performances, and there is a distinct but not distant separation between performers and audience. The smaller the audience and the less formal the event, the closer the relationship between performers and audience. Themes are geared to the occasion, and all have a strong comic element. The reflections of the *tukang gurang*, however, tend to place the sketch in a more serious perspective. Yet these more 'heavy' interludes are embedded in entertaining musical verse and counterbalanced by the synchronated dancing of the chorus.

Bujang's ethnography concentrates on the socio-cultural aspects of *boria*; on the way it symbolizes the social conditions and potential actions of its audiences. Explaining "symbolic action" as the power of drama to represent and instigate change by describing and interpreting experience in "fresh new ways" (Turner 1974:xv), Bujang classifies the symbolic action of the boria performance into four elements: (1) the status of the main characters, (2) the goal of the main characters, (3) the outcome of the action, and (4) the agency for bringing out the outcome (Bujang 1987:87). Time and setting are also seen as factors in bringing about dramatic resolution or outcome, which signals the end of the sketch and the beginning of the song and dance phase of the performance.

In essence, writes Bujang, the dramatic sketches are "an ensemble performance particular to the social life of the participants" (1987:96), meaning both performers and audience. Broad categories of themes with strong socio-cultural content are (1) wedding and family conflict themes (2) other domestic and social issues, and (3) the evils of Western cultural influences. As socio-drama, Bujang asserts that *boria* is particularly well-positioned in Malay society as a mediator between traditional values and social change because it is sanctioned by the older generation and accepted by the younger.

> The symbolic action of 'community' as shown in *boria* has imperative association with eastern cultural values acting as the regulatory factors in social change while western cultural values and the young age groups act as the main forces of change.(Bujang 1987:97)

Like lam in Laos and Thailand, *boria* has been used for explicit political propaganda in performances like "The Communist Threat" and "A Progressive Nation." Troupes also perform on Islamic religious themes such as the Prophet's birthday, although fundamentalists have challenged the mixing of religion with the sensual pleasures of song and dance.

Performing Boria requires musical and dramatic training, and troupes are either professional, semi-professional, or skilled amateurs. The latter are usually associated with youth groups and political parties, while professional and semi-professional troupes tend to exist and thrive independently. Professionalism in *boria* has less to do with profit-making or popularity, however, than it does with the "stability of the troupe and the specialized roles of its members" (Bujang 1987:14). A professional actor, for example, would have considerable experience in one type of role, and would therefore be able to improvise on a new theme at a few moments' notice.

There are no organized follow-up discussions following a *boria* performance. However, the thesis that symbolic interaction is a dynamic occurrence which plays a role in the repetition and revision of themes in a widely accessible medium (Turner 1974) suggests that such performances may have significant long term effect despite the absence of organized group reflections. The audience and performers, being part of the same social milieu, are sanctioned to act out the values and themes of the play. As participants in the life the community, they take part of the creation and expression of the next *boria*.

An additional interesting aspect of *boria* in terms of its relevance to *lam* brought out in Bujang's analysis is that there are certain pressing social issues in contemporary Malay society that *boria* has not dealt with. Thematic treatment of polygamy, promiscuity, and alcohol addiction have not, for example, been brought to the stage, although they are subjects of concern in the community. The omission of such themes leads to the observation that artistic and social constraints apply even in folk drama, and successful collaboration requires knowledge of and sensitivity toward these restraints.

El Teatro Campasino in California

El Teatro Campesino was born on the picket lines of a strike organized by the National Farm Workers Association in 1965, organized by Cesar Chavez against the grape growers in Delano, California. The migrant workers who were taking part in the strike had been difficult to organize, since most were grateful for their jobs and reluctant to press their employers for higher wages and better working conditions. The striking workers were mainly of Native American and Spanish ancestry, and had little formal education and limited English. To undermine the strike, contractors had encouraged the illegal immigration of workers from Mexico, who were willing to become scabs. Luis Valdez, who was then a theatre student, began his improvisational theatre by hanging signs on three of the strikers and instructing them to act out a skit between *huelgistas* (strikers) and *esquirol* (scab).

From these humble beginnings, *El Teatro Campesino* grow into an organized farmworkers' theatre, performing in the cities to raise money for the strike, and entertaining the workers in the union hall at night. Since then, the company has grown into a highly successful and well publicized repertory theatre that has performed on Broadway and toured Europe. As of 1980, approximately eighty other Chicano theatre groups have been formed, using Valdez' company as a model.

Artistically, the basic form originally used in the company's union hall productions was that of the *acto*, a short bilingual skit dealing with the real life situations of the migrant workers (Shank 1985:186). Like the *pungwe* and *boria*, the *acto* was highly entertaining as well as instructive. The style was similar to that of the *Commedia Dell' Arte*, using masks, exaggerated slapstick movements, and ribald exchanges to engage audience attention. The *acto* was ideal for picket line performances, and two or three could be strung together for longer union hall performances.

The historical review of *El Teatro Campesino* by Theodore Shank (1985) is based mainly on interviews with Luis Valdez. By this account, the company began to shift its base from rural to urban audiences in the late 1960's, and expanded its educational objectives to include cultural as well as political objectives. Their productions became lengthier and more sophisticated, yet retained certain distinctive qualities of folk drama. Freely mixing Spanish and English, both the actos and the full-length scripted productions were accessible to English as well as Spanish speakers, thus establishing the grounds for communication with a wider audience.

From the outset, the explicit purpose of *El Teatro Campesino* was to motivate Chicano audiences toward taking political action resulting in a more equitable society. As the company expanded, Valdez sought also to explore the root causes of Chicano oppression, one of which was the loss of traditional culture. This exploration led to the creation of such plays as *No Saco Nada de la Escuela* (I Don't Get Anything Out of School), which demonstrates, through satire and stereotypes, the assimilationist effort by the California school system to eradicate all but white, middle-class values (Shank 1985:187).

At the Farmworkers' Cultural Center, established first in Del Rey (1967) and later in San Juan Bautista (1979), Valdez and his associates taught classes in music, history, drama, English, Spanish, and "practical politics." The company also began to seek out the deeper historical roots of Chicano culture by turning toward the philosophy and mythology of their Mayan ancestors. The result of this study was a change in the direction of the company from a confrontational, political style of theatre with trappings borrowed from the Italian commedia dell' arte to a more traditional, epic form of drama called the *mito* (myth):

> Like the Mayas, they came to believe that people must be in harmony with nature and other human beings or violence would result. No longer was the aim of their theatre work to rally the Chicano community against those who were seen as oppressors; they wanted to harmonize the individual with 'the greatest cause that unifies all mankind and that is god...the cause of social justice becomes tied to the cause of everything else in our universe and in the cosmos." (Shank 1987:189)

The public television production (1991) of "La Pastorela" in 1991 contains many of elements present in El Teatro Campesino throughout the two and a half decades of its evolution. The structure of the televised play, written and directed by Luis Valdez, incorporates the Mexican-American Christian tradition and applies its spiritual values to struggles of life for migrant farmworkers. Elements of Native American culture are also present in the depiction of demons and angels, sorcery, and visions. The moral conflict presented is between selfish materialism on the one hand and spiritual triumph on the other. Greed is presented by the devil's henchman as "the American way," while closely knit family and community relationships are offered as the redeeming alternative. The play is entertaining in its promotion of moralism, with songs, dances, and hip one-liners interwoven with the familiar and predictable plot.

The historical development of El Teatro Campesino encompasses many interesting possibilities for the future of Lao folk opera in America. Its speedy evolution into ethnic theatre on a modern stage, drawing large audiences and using electronic media to its advantage have, in the eyes of some, diluted its usefulness as educational folk drama within the Chicano community. Luis Valdez has been accused of "selling out" in his recent work, which is no longer overtly political (Shank 1985:194). On the other hand, as the company's audience has broadened and the message has deepened, it can be argued that its effects are considerably more far-reaching.

Yet, even in video, *El Teatro Campesino* maintains the capacity of folk drama to adjust old themes and distant ideals to the idiom and comprehension of contemporary audience. This is also the goal of Spiderwoman Theater, a company of Native American women who weave themes of spirituality with the realities of urban life using traditional drums, dance, and storytelling techniques.[5]

For the Lao-American immigrant community in America, Spiderwoman Theater and *El Teatro Campesino* represent models for the survival and evolution of an folk medium beyond its current boundaries toward wider recognition and affirmation in an increasingly pluralistic society. Both have sought to rediscover elements of their original cultural roots, piecing them together in ways that appeal to wider audiences.

While the development of *lam* in America is bound to follow its own course, looking both to domestic models of ethnic theatre as well as to the revival of folk drama in Africa and Asia for examples of performance media with varying degrees of educational impact may help guide the realization of its full potential.

Notes

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[1] For example, The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1976) definition 7.a. "A specific type of artistic technique or means of expression as determined by the materials used or the creative methods involved" (p. 815) and definition 2.c.in Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1986): "an intermediate or direct instrumentality or means, esp: a channel, method or system of communication, information, or entertainment" (p. 1403).

[2] In the family reflection based on the *moh lam* performance reported in Chapter 7 of this dissertation, the parents admitted to having sung to each other in *lam* during their courtship.

[3] *dhamma* - the doctrine or accumulated teachings of Buddhism, reflective of universal laws which "govern human existence and may be known by reason" (Hajime Nakamura, "The Basic Teachings of Buddhism" in Buddhism in the Modern World (New York: Collier Books, 1976), p. 5.

[5] As reported on Morning Edition, NPR, Nov. 6, 1992. The Spiderwoman Theater uses improvisational acting techniques to construct performances reflecting the real lives of the performers.

CHAPTER III

BUDDHIST WAYS OF KNOWING

Ways of perceiving the world are deeply influenced by the basic elements of culture, even when the content of these perceptions transcends local boundaries. The way any art form is used within a particular cultural context reflects the unique way the world is perceived and categorized, as manifested in the symbols created to organize and communicate knowledge.

In this study of the educational role of a Lao performing art within its own cultural context, it is essential to explore the religious influences and moral codes that pervade its messages. As in Indian folk drama, the moral vein in all forms of *lam* is unmistakable. In Mathur's words, it "arises from the basic things of life." (1964:5)

Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to identify and interpret certain of these influences from an educator's point of view. While the sharing of observations and reflections on the cultural origins of knowledge has traditionally been the domain of ethnographers, travelers, and poets, the whole endeavor of cross-cultural understanding is now also a central issue for teachers, administrators, and media producers.

Insofar as it is possible to interpret local knowledge across cultures, it is crucial for the outsider to comprehend the emic, the insiders' point of view, as closely and completely as possible. Such efforts, described by Geertz (1983:10) as "sorting through the machinery of distant ideas," inevitably lead to the conclusion that "the shapes of knowledge are always ineluctably local, indivisible from their instruments and their encasements." Similarly, Friere (1989; 1990) has argued that educational practice evolves from the ontological and epistemologies relationships people have with others and with the world. In the complexities brought about by the conflicts that inevitably arise whenever cultures come into contact, looking out far and in deep become matters of necessity in the equitable sharing of the looking place, the common ground.

Learning from the Asian Perspective

As Hans (1958) and Hewage (1986) have pointed out, the most significant conditioning factors in education are based on religious and philosophical traditions. The three main features which distinguish Western from Eastern cultures in this respect are, according to Hans: (a) the Greco-Roman (Hellenistic) heritage, (b) Christianity and (c) the Renaissance and modern science (1986:39). In contrast, the dominant religious influences in Asia have been the Confucian, Hindu and Buddhist traditions, which foster world views and educational systems far different in purpose and practice from those that pervade European thought.

From the Asian perspective, particularly in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, learning is not primarily a childhood activity, but gives "equal emphasis to child, youth, and adult while encouraging lifelong integrated learning for adults, because education is seen not only as a lifelong (*yava-jiva*) process, but as a process that continues even after death (Hewage 1986:42). Therefore, in Asian Buddhist societies, it is not unusual for learning opportunities, both formal and informal, to be open to people of all ages and at all levels of knowledge. Although there may be other limiting factors which can inhibit one's lifelong learning ambitions, such opportunities offer avenues for movement toward spiritual objectives that are typically devalued or ignored by current Western models. Becoming a lay devotee, for example, or entering an apprenticeship to become a spiritual healer are traditional paths which acknowledge self-directed, adult learning styles and make use of established educational modes, but are seldom acknowledged in Western academic literature associated with nonformal adult education.

In traditional Asian learning systems, educational objectives have an altogether different direction than they do in the West. According to Hewage, traditional Asian models of education are directed toward "understanding of the self by the processes of introspection, self-analysis, reflection, and insight meditation, along with the observation of social, physical, and psychological forces interacting with the self," (Hans 1958:44), or what Joseph Campbell has called "the inner reaches of outer space."[1]

Thus, it may be argued that the objectives of Eastern learning systems are more humanistic than those of the West, where scientific knowledge of the world and the universe has become the major emphasis. Truth is defined as that which is observable, and general assumptions must be validated through repeated experimentation and rational argument, leaving little room for intuition, contemplation, and reflection.

In traditional Eastern learning systems, the main source of knowledge is reflective and internal. The self is less separated from the natural world than it is in the West, and it is from the interaction between the two that knowledge and wisdom arise. According to Hewage, the main objective of education in the great learning institutions of Asia prior to colonization was also different.

> Knowledge that had no direct relevance to desirable human behavior, and did not thereby promote the welfare of the learner and the society in general, was not given priority in the content of learning. (Hewage 1986:44)

Epistemology, broadly defined as a philosophical position on the origin and nature of knowledge, is an aspect of world view that is deeply influenced by culture. To the Greeks, epistemology was one of the three branches of metaphysics. The other two branches, ontology and cosmology, have lost credibility in Western thought, especially since empiricist views on the origins of human knowledge[2] have gained acceptance as the prevailing truth. Metaphysics itself is no longer considered a worthwhile intellectual pursuit in the West, since according to empiricist thinking, that which it attempts to study cannot be observed or proved.

Still, even though what might be called the speculative branches of philosophy are no longer legitimate intellectual pursuits in Western centers of learning, the questions of what we know and how we know it, the central concerns of epistemology, eventually lead to the larger questions of who we are and what the nature of our relationship to the universe and each other amounts to. It is something of a paradox that these most profound quests have lost their legitimacy as academic disciplines in Western universities, leaving the metaphysical assumptions upon which more apparent philosophic theories are based shrouded in mystery. Whether or not they are out in the open, the religious and philosophical traditions of a culture strongly influence its values, attitudes and assumptions, including what is considered "common sense" (Geertz 1983).

In societies strongly influenced by the teachings of the Buddha, including that of the Lao, educational activities emphasize experiential paths to personal knowledge over the systematic study of either the physical or metaphysical world. Instead, followers are encouraged to first seek the higher reality within themselves, whereupon the nature of the physical world falls into less prominent perspective.

Buddhism encompasses many distinct yet confluent forms of knowledge that reflect the local cultures wherever its teachings have spread. The syncretic blend of Buddhist doctrine with Hindu mythology and animist practices in Southeast Asia is typical of its accommodating nature. It is also important to consider each of these as a major factor in the shaping of local knowledge, even in the Westernized societies of "modern" Asia (Tambiah 1970;1985) as well as in the growing Southeast Asian enclaves throughout the post-industrial West.

Principles of Buddhist Epistemology

Basic Buddhist philosophy, which in essence is shared by the two major branches of Buddhism[3], is a unique blend of ideals and ethics. Grounded in the *Vedas*, the ancient (1500-1200 B.C.) collection of sacred hymns forming liturgical base of Hindu philosophy, the teachings of the Buddha were distinguished from the religious traditions popular in 5th century India. This is demonstrated partly by their open rejection of the authority of traditional sources of knowledge. The cornerstone of Buddhist doctrine, however, is a direct descendant of the Hindu concept of *dhamma*, which literally means "sacred duty," but in a broader sense refers to the moral order that sustains the cosmos, society, and the individual" (Miller 1986:2).

In Buddhism, the term *dhamma* is also used to mean truth, in all its forms; that is, both the truth that resides within individuals and formulations of the truth expressed in the natural world as well as in the teachings of the Buddha.

Rather than presenting a religious dogma, as was popular among the Brahmins in those days, the Buddha taught an "independent ethical morality" (Nakamura 1976:3) in which the only trustworthy path of knowledge is through individual recognition of the truth, or nature of things. This important point is the subject of a discourse on the nature of knowing delivered by the Buddha in Kesaputta, home of the Kalama clan, hence known as the *Kamala Sutta* When the people of Kamala expressed their dismay about the fact that Brahmins of the various sects made a practice of denouncing each others' dogmas, the Buddha responded with a string of cautionary measures:

> Don't you accept anything merely because it is a revealed authoritative tradition. Don't you accept anything merely because it is an unbroken succession of teaching (apostolic succession). don't you accept anything merely because it is report or hearsay. Don't you accept anything merely because it is found in the scriptures (of various sects). Don't you accept anything merely on the grounds of logic or from speculative metaphysical theories. Don't you accept anything merely because of standpoint or point of view. Don't you accept anything merely after reflecting on reasons. Don't you accept a fact as true merely because it agrees with a theory that you are already convinced of. Don't you accept anything merely on the grounds of competence or reliability of a person. Don't you accept anything merely out of respect for your teacher. (tr. Jumbala 1974:4)

The full list of negatives is repeated four times throughout the *sutta*, adding with each repetition a positive suggestion for judging which teachings to abandon and which to accept. "Whenever you know for yourselves...then do you abandon (or accept) them" (*Kamala Sutta*, tr. Jumbala 1974:4).

The emphasis in Buddhism is therefore on the power of the individual to not only know which things are true and ethical, but to choose a course of action based on that knowledge. In the Buddhist approach to learning, this intuitive faculty of knowing, upon which we must ultimately rely, is neither permanent nor independent. Like other mental and physical faculties that make up human existence, the mind is impermanent and interdependent. However, it is capable of becoming aware of the true nature of things, which is both permanent and absolute.

As interpreted by Walpola Rahula, what we call an 'individual,'is really a temporary combination of five aggregates *(pancadakkhandha)*. These are: (1) the aggregate of matter, or the four great elements, (2) the aggregate of sensations, both physical and mental, (3) the aggregate of perceptions, (4) the aggregate of mental formations, and (5) the aggregate of consciousness. All of these play a role in the act of knowing, and in this sense are roughly equivalent to the processes described in Western psychology as sensory perception leading to cognition.

The unique quality of the Buddhist approach lies in its view that the material world observable through these bundles of aggregates constitutes, along with the bundles themselves, only one kind of reality. In fact, the worldly existence known to us through the aggregates is the lesser reality associated with the concept of *dukkha*, the suffering brought about by the impermanence of life on earth. This cycle of existence *(samsara)* is repeated throughout eternity unless a state of knowing the higher reality *(nirvana* or *nibbana)*, which is beyond words and presumably beyond culture, can be achieved.

As a result, Buddhist epistemology is concerned primarily with guiding people toward realization of this greater, ultimate truth. Reality is, for Buddhists, neither good nor bad in itself. Rather, it simply refers to that which *is*, as opposed to what is not. In one discourse, (*Abhayarajakumara Sutta*, as quoted in Jayatilleka 1963:351), the Buddha, as one who had experienced the ultimate truth, stated clearly that he would only assert those propositions which are true, useful, and "either pleasant or unpleasant at the right moment." (Jayatilleka 1963:351). The word used in Pali for this kind of "truth" (*bhutam, tacham*), according to Jayatilleka, is significant in this way:

> ...it literally means 'fact,'i.e.what has become, taken place, or happened. Likewise *yathabhutam*, which means 'in accordance with fact' is often used synonymously with truth. It is the object of knowledge - one knows what is in accordance with fact. This tacitly implies the acceptance of a correspondence theory of truth. In the *Apannaka Sutta* there is a conscious avowal of this theory. Falsity is here defined as the denial of fact or as what does not accord with fact. (Jayatilleka 1963:352)

In the Buddhist view, what our senses perceive as the "real world" does not really define the limits of absolute truth, as it does in empiricist thought This is made clear in the concept of *dhamma*, which although is often translated simply as "teachings," includes the concept of a whole, a universal truth that encompasses an ultimate reality beyond the limits of the perceptual world. Consequently, "there is nothing in the universe or outside, good or bad, conditioned or non-conditioned, which is not included in this term." (Rahula 1974:58). Accordingly, the purpose of education for humans, who as sentient beings are uniquely poised to discover the true nature of existence, is to provide assistance to all who seek to learn.

The Buddhist Learning Cycle

Gotoma (the Buddha-to-be) was born into the wealthy Sakya family in the 6th century B.C. in an area of northern India which is now part of Nepal. As befit his role of probable future prince, the young Gotoma was privately tutored in theoretical subjects and underwent military training. His teachers, however, perceived that the young man had a brooding nature, and recommended that special measures be taken to keep him from being exposed to the realities of life outside the serenity of the palace grounds.

These restrictions only sharpened the young man's curiosity, and he conspired with a charioteer to escape the golden cage. During this excursion, Gotoma observed human suffering for the first time in his life. He witnessed the sick, the elderly, the poor, and the dying, which caused him to realize, among other things, the inevitability of his own death. Thereafter, the young man's curiosity about the real nature of birth, suffering, and death grew into a lifelong intellectual and spiritual quest.

Learning

At the age of 29, Gotoma the prince decided to abandon the comforts of home, family, and career to become a homeless recluse. He wandered the valley of the Ganges for six years in search of a solution to the "reality of suffering" (Rahula 1974:xv). This phase of his education might be considered the "experiential learning" period, during which he first sought teachers whose systems of meditation would lead to fresh discoveries. Failing to gain clear insights using this approach, he turned to the ancient practise of asceticism. By denying his body any sort of comfort or nourishment, he hoped to gain clarity of mind.

This experience taught Gotoma that renunciation of bodily comfort was insufficient to reach the goal of discovering the ultimate reality, the true nature of things. In fact, inflicting great pain on the body could only obstruct the search. After partaking of a meal of rice pudding and gradually recovering his physical strength (Rahula 1974:12), Gotoma sat down to meditate under the now famous Bodhi tree, and at that moment passed into the final phase of his education, the Enlightenment.

Significantly, this successful final stage was entered in a fully conscious mental state and a well-nourished, healthy body. *Nibbana* was finally achieved through a process of trying and subsequently discarding false leads, of finally trusting in one's internal meditative faculties. Thus, as he gradually moved from authoritative, formal instruction into increasingly self-directed learning situations, the Buddha-to-be successfully gained control over his own destiny.

Knowing

During the course of his marvelous revelation, the Buddha is said to have experienced three types of knowledge. The first was of his past lives, "back and back, past great aeons of cosmic evolution and of devolution" (Khantipalo 1970:14), past the cyclical transitions of birth, aging, and death. The second type of knowledge was that of the arising and passing away of all sentient beings according to their actions. That is, he saw that a being is capable of directing the course of future lives by choosing meritorious acts over demeritorious ones. It was from this insight that the foundation of Buddhist ethics, the potential for shaping one's future through conscious volitional actions (*kamma*) arose. The third and final type of knowledge experienced by the Buddha during the course of his enlightenment is described as a moment of perfect wisdom, of unlimited vision, of "shattering the prison of unknowing" (Khantipalo 1970: 14). At this moment, he became one who literally knows all there is to know, who has seen through the veil of ignorance and delusion to the ultimate reality beyond words, beyond the temporary images offered by passing existences.

> The eye was born, knowledge was born, wisdom was born, science was born, light was born. (*Samyutta Nikaya V*, as quoted in Rahula: 9)

As the all-knowing one, the Buddha then considered his position with regard to the world. He could have simply waited out the remainder of his days as a recluse before passing into blissful non-existence. However, he used his extraordinary powers of perception to survey the world, and, finding it to be a pitiful sight, "great compassion blossomed like a full-opened lotus in his heart" (Khantipalo 1974:15). At this moment, out of empathy for the masses of humanity still living in delusion and abject misery, the Buddha decided to become a teacher.

Teaching

As a *tathagata*, literally, "one who has found the truth" (Rahula 1959:146) through direct experience, the Buddha committed the remaining forty-five years of his life to teaching others how to go about achieving the same blissful experience. An important distinction is made between "teaching" and "preaching" in that the Buddha did not set forth dogmas or exhort his listeners to believe in a certain creed. "It was always a question of knowing and seeing, and not that of believing" (Rahula 1974:9). The message to seekers was, rather, to "come and see," to experience the ultimate reality with crystal clarity, for themselves.

As Gotoma the Buddha set out to share the *dhamma*-vision he had experienced, choices had to be made both about content and method. Having experienced literally all there is to know, he faced the dilemma of what to select for which audiences, for his intent was not merely to spread a doctrine, but to empower others to see it for themselves.

Out of his vast store of wisdom, the Buddha chose to teach only those things which he considered useful; that is, he limited the content of his teaching to matters which he felt would set followers along the path toward ultimate wisdom, toward their own *nibbana*. He explained this choice in terms of selecting a few leaves from an entire forest:

> "What do you think, O bhikkhus? What is more? these few leaves in my hand or the leaves in the forest over here?"
>
> "Sir, very few are the leaves in the hand of the Blessed One, but indeed the leaves in the Simsapa forest over here are very much more abundant."
>
> "Even so, bhikkhus, of what I have known I have told you only a little, what I have not told you is very much more. And why have I not told you (those things)? Because that is not useful...not leading to *nirvana*." (*Samyutta-nikaya* V, as quoted in Rahula 1974:12)

The methods chosen by the Buddha during his long teaching career represented the traditions of the day. In 5th century B.C. India, it was common for Brahmins and recluses to wander from place to place as nonformal religious educators, illuminating their doctrines to whomever wished to listen, and engaging each other or their audiences in vigorous debate.

As a teacher, the Buddha constantly promoted self-directedness in his mobile community education program in India by offering his listeners the opportunity to "come and see." Often the group was small, as for example the five ascetics who had been his colleagues during the self-mortification phase, and who were present at his first discourse in the Deer Park near Benares. In other discourses, he engaged a single learner in dialogue, usually for the purpose of deconstructing a misguided assumption, then setting the listener on a truer course. At other times, the Buddha presented more formal discourses to larger groups of laypeople or to the community of monks who had become his devoted disciples.

> He taught all classes of men and women - kings and peasants, Brahmins and outcasts, bankers and beggars, holy men and robbers - without making the slightest distinction between them. He recognized no differences of caste or social groupings, and the Way he preached was open to all men and women who were ready to understand and to follow it. (Rahula 1974:xv)

In many cases, individuals or representatives of a group (such as the Kalamas) approached him with a specific question which would form the basis for a lengthy direct discourse. In other cases, he delivered his teaching in the form of parables or stories recounting his own former lives. In the spirit of the oral tradition, he never followed a prescribed script, but constantly improvised, adjusting the level and style of his teaching to suit a particular audience.[4]

Much of the actual message taught by the Buddha is one of non-attachment, achievable only through the extinction of human craving, or desire. The introduction of this doctrine is known as "setting into motion the wheel of the *dhamma*" (tr. Jumbala 1974:xvii), and was first revealed to the five ascetics in the Deer Park. Central to this *dhamma*-wheel are the Four Noble Truths, which have to do with the existence, origins and cessation of suffering (*dukkha*). The fourth Noble Truth, which is divided into eight categories (the Eightfold Path), offers specific prescriptions for the the cessation of *dukkha*. These guidelines are also the foundation for Buddhist ethics, and as such are practical advice for all followers who wish to gain vision in this life, and merit toward better conditions in the next. This sense of correctness made explicit in the *dhamma*, states in no uncertain terms that there is an ethically correct way, and by implication a wrong way, to behave and to be:

> Such is the middle course of conduct with I, the Tathagata, have discovered with supreme wisdom, producing the Dhamma-eye, producing intuitive insight, conducing to tranquility, to supreme knowledge, to perfect knowledge, to Nibbana. (*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, tr. Jumbala 1974:23)

As an ethical statement, the *dhamma* thus spells out the right attitudes to adopt (right thought, right mindfulness) as well as the best actions to take (right speech, right livelihood) in order to live a harmonious life and to achieve progress toward Enlightenment.

However, the path outlined in the Buddhist *dhamma* is much more than a set of rules designed to keep human instincts under control. In the Buddhist view, they are in accordance with the natural moral order, in perfect harmony with nature. Obstructions to maintaining this order are summarized as the three roots of evil: greed, aversion, delusion (Khantipalo 1970: 69). The major life duty Buddhists undertake in order to avoid hindrances involves a conscious choice to follow the general principle known as the "Middle Way," for which the goals enumerated in the Eightfold Path form the fundamental signposts. While these goals are stated in positive terms, the *dhamma* also contains numerous rejoinders and warnings, which become more specific the closer a follower becomes associated with the formal community of monks and nuns.

While lay followers generally undertake to follow the basic set of Buddhist principles known as the Five Precepts and on occasion take on an additional three, members of the monastic community strictly adhere ten basic precepts plus a set of 227 more specific regulations[5] containing detailed instructions for carrying out literally every physical and moral aspect of the monastic life.

In keeping with the principle of non-attachment, the Buddha cautioned that even his teachings should not be clung to as as an absolute, permanent truth. To be attached to one thing, he warned, "and to look down upon other things (views) as inferior - this the wise men call a fetter." (*Suttanipata*, as quoted in Rahula 1974:10). To demonstrate, the Buddha compared his own teachings to a raft, to be used for crossing over the waters of what is not known, but not for retaining after one's goal has been reached.

The raft, the metaphor for the *dhamma*, is constructed out of of grass, sticks, branches and leaves, and is powered by human effort. As such, it is a vehicle for getting to the other side of the waterway; that is, to reach one's goal. In the parable, the Buddha asks his listeners what should then be done with the raft. Should it be lifted on one's head or shoulder and carried onward? Or should it be beached, submerged, or otherwise gotten rid of?

> Suppose now I beach this raft on dry ground or submerge it and proceed as I desire? In doing this, monks, that man would be doing what should be done with the raft. Even so, monks, is this simile of the raft taught by me for crossing over, not for retaining. You, monks, by understanding this simile should get rid, even of right mental objects, all the more of wrong ones. (tr. Jumbala 1974: xxiii)

As an educator, the Buddha was aware that his message had to be expressed in different ways for different groups of learners. These groups are basically distinguished by their chosen lifestyles as (1) spiritual seekers who have renounced worldly attachments, and (2) householders, or lay people leading ordinary family lives. Both are fully capable of following the Buddha's teaching successfully and of attaining high spiritual states (Rahula 1974:77). The content and method of the learning-teaching cycle varies according to these lifestyles. Members of the community of monks and nuns must follow a more rigorous, formalized curriculum than do ordinary householders and lay devotees, while the recluse or hermit, still a respected career choice in parts of modern Asia, is perhaps the most self-directed of adult learners.

Traditional Learning Modes

Like other Asian societies in which the *dhamma* has prevailed as a major cultural influences, Lao Buddhist culture incorporates systems of both formal and nonformal education that flourished long before the introduction of secular schools. Of the two major branches of Buddhism, the Theravada school is known for its strict adherence to the original discourses of the Buddha, as compiled in the Pali scriptures recorded in Sri Lanka some 200 years after the Buddha delivered them.[6]

Early Buddhism in India is described by Keyes as the religion of "a small number of religious virtuosos, that is of monks (*bhikkhu*) and nuns (*bhikkhuni*) who attempted to practice as closely as possible the way taught by Gotama Buddha" (Keyes 1977: 78). During this period, the discourses of the Buddha were memorized and passed down word for word through the *sangha*, as evidenced in the opening testimonial phrase of each *sutta*, "Thus I have heard..."

When the Buddha's teachings received royal patronage in the person of the King Asoka (269-232 BC), they evidently gained a substantially larger following of lay adherents in India. King Asoka was also instrumental in the establishment of Buddhist centers of learning in Ceylon, which has remained the hub of the Theravada school.

The Theravada branch of Buddhism, which distinguished itself during this era by its preservation of and strict adherence to the Pali canon (the *Tripitaka*), literally means "the Way of the Elders." The Theravada tradition also stresses the role of the *sangha* as an active teaching community whose primary duty is "try to help others realize the truth" (Boupphaphanh 1988: 13).

It was not until several centuries after the death of King Asoka that Theravada Buddhist teachings flourished beyond monastery walls as a popular religion with mass appeal (Keyes 1977:81). Coincidentally, Buddhist teachings started to take hold in the classical civilizations of Pagan, Angkor, and Sukhothai through their prosperous trade relations with the subcontinent. The educational institutions and traditions already established in the royal courts of India and Ceylon were to become models for the formal education of princes and monks, as well as for both the religious and practical education of laypeople in the agricultural communities which now make up the modern states of Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos.

Knower-Learner Roles

In both classical and contemporary Buddhism, there is a clear distinction between the kinds of learning and teaching that take place inside and outside monastery walls. This grouping is roughly equivalent to the distinctions between formal and informal, or popular education, although in the context of traditional Buddhist societies, monks are trained to perform both roles. As will be seen in the training and apprenticeship of Lao folk opera performers (Chapter V), informal tutoring arrangements can also be made to teach members of the laity one or more aspects of what could be considered vocational skills. The teaching role of former monks who have become experts in healing practices and other traditional specialities is also related to the vital educational agenda of the *sangha*, as are the preservation and duplication of sacred texts, scientific literature, and community records.

Although their organizational structure and rules vary according to the diverse societal contexts where communities have been established, all Buddhist monks and nuns are in some way involved in the learning-teaching cycle. The original order of almsmen and almswomen was formally sanctioned by the Buddha shortly before his passing on at the age of eighty. He enjoined them to go forth and spread the *dhamma* not only to prospective members of the order, but to "kings and courtesans, brahmins and beggars, to high and to low alike according to their various powers of understanding" (Khantipalo 1970:18).

Thus, in the spirit of "come and see," anyone who enters a Buddhist temple is expected to become a learner on some level. A conscious decision to follow Buddhist teachings, rather than a conversion based on faith, is the sole prerequisite for becoming a Buddhist (Rahula 1974:80), and the level of practice or devotion one selects is also a matter of individual choice. Buddhists express their adherence to the teachings by "taking refuge" in the three gems - Buddha, the *dhamma*, and the *sangha* - and by agreeing to undertake the five basic moral obligations (the five precepts). These proclamations are chanted at each Buddhist ceremony and confirmed by presiding monks, or may be made individually and privately.

The primary role of a monk, then, in a Theravada Buddhist community is that of teacher and spiritual counselor. Monks also play a key role in the acquisition and transfer of merit (*boun*), a practice through which individuals believe they can increase their chances for good fortune, both in this life and the next. Merit can be made in many ways, each of which is related to the Buddhist virtues of selflessness and mindfulness. Offering food to the monks, for example, is a merit-making activity, as is helping others in need. One may also accumulate merit by listening to and discussing the *dhamma,* a motivational factor which undoubtedly contributes toward the reverence for teaching and learning in Theravada Buddhist societies.

Lay teachers are respected for their knowledge and position not only as instructors but as guardians of public morality. In this context, the teacher-learner role is one in which there are certain prescribed duties. For example, learners are obliged to venerate the teacher as well as tend to his material needs. Duties to teachers are specified in the *Sigala Sutta* in terms of appropriate actions and attention. The learner is also instructed to be receptive to the mode of teaching chosen by the more knowledgeable master.

> A pupil should minister to his teachers as the southern quarter in five ways: by rising (from his seat, to salute them); by waiting upon them; by his eagerness to learn; by personal service; and by respectfully accepting their teaching. (*Sigala Sutta*, as quoted in Rahula, 1974:122)

In return, the teacher is bound by duty to...

> ...show their love for their pupil in five ways: they train him well; they make him grasp what he has learnt; they instruct him thoroughly in the lore of every art; they introduce him to their friends and companions; they provide for his security everywhere. (1974:122)

These duties cover teacher-learner relationships at all levels, both within and outside of the *sangha*. The closer the relationship, the deeper the commitment on both sides. Novice monks, for example, are literally given over to their preceptors during the training period leading to ordination

In ancient Buddhist education, the relationship between teacher and learner during monastic training was indeed close. The student's personal service to his elder, which included assistance with the morning cleansing rituals, serving food, and sweeping, was considered part of the educational process (Pollack 1983:6). The situation was reversed if the student fell ill; the monk-teacher was expected to attend to both the physical and spiritual needs of his student. Students and adult learners who did not choose to be initiated into the monastery were expected to pay a fee or perform services in exchange for formal instruction in the Buddhist teachings as well as in the arts and sciences.

In monastic schools, questioning of the doctrine and dialogue by novice monks is encouraged (Pollack 1983), but within well-defined parameters of teacher-student etiquette. Outward displays of respect toward the teacher and payment in the form of currency, offerings, or services are expected. In return, the teacher is duty bound not only to teach, but to look out after the best interests of the learners.

For lay learners, the duties mentioned in the *Sigala Sutta* are demonstrated in the customary honoring of teachers, offerings to monks, and attitudes of deep respect and attentiveness toward the messengers of the *dhamma*. At Lao Buddhist ceremonies, it is customary for the senior monk to read or recite a *Jataka* tale following the consumption of food offering. As the story is intoned, listeners assume a pose of prayerful respect throughout the lengthy discourse and bow deeply to the reader following its conclusion.

Throughout rural Laos, temples have also traditionally been centers for popular education where visitors or followers freely engage monks in dialogue on religious and social matters, or approach them for counseling and healing. Monks also teach basic literacy, practical skills, and religious subjects to individuals or to loosely organized groups of learners upon request.

The counseling role has expanded significantly in Lao refugee communities, where the *sangha* has assumed unprecedented responsibilities for the spiritual health and well-being of the community, thus fulfilling the duty of teacher as compassionate counselor:

> My role as a monk here in the United States, as I see it, is to help the Lao refugees...not just the Lao but also the Khmer, Vietnamese, Chinese and others who come to the temple...and also by telephone..to help them with their hardship times and stress, many of them, I comfort them by telephone, and so forth. The duties I have are different...if I consider the duties that I had back in Laos, I think I do more here in this country. (Minisouphanth 1992)

Interestingly, the role of nuns and laywomen devotees has also expanded in resettled Cambodian and Lao communities in America, partly because of the large proportion of older widows in the population, and partly because of the high incidence of mental and physical problems associated with the effects of the refugee experience.

To be sure, the role of the teacher-counselor in societies deeply influenced by Theravada Buddhism is held in high regard, since knowledge is considered the path to personal spiritual liberation. As the ultimate teacher, the Buddha commanded respect, but not necessarily unswerving allegiance or blind faith. On the contrary, he encouraged independent thinking and questioning of the *dhamma*. Having embarked on his teaching career as an act of compassion, the Buddha was an example of infinite patience and encouragement.

Thus in the Buddhist tradition, teachers have a certain authority by virtue of their accumulated knowledge and merit, but are also expected to enter into caring, personal relationships with their charges rather than fulfill strictly formal, detached, and doctrinaire roles. Within the monastic training network in Theravada Buddhist countries, each novice is attached to an elder monk who becomes his personal mentor, and who is usually referred to as *luang pii* (elder brother) by the novice (Tambiah 1968:124). The image of the authoritarian school master wielding a cane, invoking sheer terror in the hearts of his pupils is probably more typical of the French Indochinese school system than it is of pre-colonial community education systems in Southeast Asia.

Categories of Knowledge

The second duty of the teacher, to cause the student to grasp what has been taught, is described by the Lao-American monk Boupphaphanh in Providence as "teaching in such a way that he understands and remembers well what he has been taught." What this and other guidelines from the *dhamma* suggest is a recognition of individual learning styles and preferences. Although the ultimate goal of attaining Enlightenment is the same for all, great flexibility is allowed in the ways and means of attaining successive levels of knowledge or skill. Self-directed learning is therefore encouraged, as long as it falls within certain ethical guidelines. In contrast to secular models of education, time constraints do not apply. There is no pressure to reach prescribed objectives within prescribed time frames, or for that matter within a lifetime. In the Buddhist view, the attempt to attain knowledge and understanding too quickly can easily lead to superficial and faulty conclusions.

The interpretations of the Pali canon set forth by the scholar monk Buddhaghosha in the 5th century AD are also a cornerstone of the Theravada learning tradition. A thesis submitted by Buddhaghosha to the Mahavihara University in Ceylon on the classification of knowledge is still a standard text in Buddhist universities today (Hewage 1986:50).

According to the Buddhaghosha thesis, the goal of all learning is to reach a supra-mundane level of understanding attainable only through the personal experience of Enlightenment. Ordinary mundane knowledge, which taken collectively is interpreted as the "ability to think clearly and understand comprehensively" (Khantipalo 1970:86) is a lesser goal which, when properly cultivated, may lead to the higher levels.

According to Buddhist learning theory, the understanding of which ordinary human beings are capable can be divided into three categories, which are translated by Hewage as "perception," "cognition," and "understanding." These categories are illustrated by the following simile:

> A child without discretion, a villager, and money changer see a heap of coins lying on a money-changer's counter. The child knows only that the coins are figured and ornamented, long, square, or round, but does not know their value. The villager also knows their shapes and colors, and that they are reckoned as valuable for human use and enjoyment, but does not know whether the metal is genuine or false or of half value. The money changer knows all these and he does so by looking at the coins and applying several other methods of testing. He can say where they must have been made and with what metal. (Buddhaghosha *Visuddhi Magga*, as retold in Hewage 1989:50)

Buddhaghosha did not suggest that each level was necessarily a prerequisite to the next, but he did propose that different strategies might justifiably be used by individuals as a matter of ability or preference, so long as they eventually lead to the same goal.

Approach to Learning

The approaches to learning identified by Buddhaghosha were (1) listening to someone else or reading someone else's writing, (2) gaining conceptual knowledge by thinking or reflection, and (3) developing insight meditation as a direct means of knowing the truth. Thus the canonical instruction given by the Buddha to all teachers, to "teach in a way that he understands," recognizes diversity in age, prior experience, and individual learning styles.

As Rahula points out, the Buddha did not place a higher value on the monastic life over family life in terms of individual spiritual progress:

> There are numerous references in Buddhist literature to men and women living ordinary, normal family lives who successfully practised what the Buddha taught, and realized Nirvana. (Rahula 1959:77)

While monastic training systems have developed relatively rigid curricula in accordance with the diverse organizational structures of their orders, most Southeast Asian orders allow a good deal of flexibility in terms of time constraints and learning objectives. For example, a distinction is made in Thailand between monks who live in the towns and learn the scriptures (*pariyat*) and monks who dwell in the forest and practice meditation (*patibat*). In the *Dvedhavitakka Sutta*, the Buddha told a gathering of devoted monks that there was in fact only so much he or anyone else could teach them:

> Monks! whatever a kind a merciful teacher should do for the benefit of his disciples out of kind consideration for their welfare, that I have done in regard to you. There the shaded retreats. There the empty huts. Betake yourselves there to meditate and work out your own salvation without negligence, never to be embarrassed thereafter. This is the word of my repeated instruction to you. (tr. Jumbala 1974:48)

As inferred in the parable of the raft, the seeker must eventually seek detachment even from the teacher and the mode of learning that has carried him to a certain shore. In the Buddhist tradition, the scriptures are indeed to be venerated as the recorded words of the Buddha, but not to be worshipped as divine truth. In reference to the choice of a less scholarly path, Venerable Khantipalo notes that the forest dwelling monks are not tied to the books and formal lessons that saturate the consciousness of the town-bhikkus:

> Many patibat bhikkus do not know Pali well, having never studied it formally but instead of opening the books of the scriptures, they are encouraged by their Teachers who have already travelled along the Path they teach, to make efforts to open the book of Dhamma which lies within, since the nature of materiality (body) and mentality is the nature of Dhamma. (Khantipalo 1970:174-75)

Therefore, all teaching is itself part of the wheel of becoming, impermanent and ultimately perishable. The lessons are, however, like those who teach them, venerated as the vehicles that can carry seekers toward the ultimate goal.

Learning Media

The role of literacy in Buddhism, while important, is confined primarily to preservation of knowledge, both sacred and profane. Techniques used in popular education rely mainly on oral transmission through chanting, reciting, discussing, and dramatic versification. The original discourses and sayings of the Buddha were recalled, recited, and authenticated at a council shortly after his passing. They were then handed down through the disciples and their succession in an unbroken oral tradition for four centuries before they were committed to writing. Evidence that the discourses, rules, and stories that make up the present Buddhist canon were intended to be memorized is abundant:

> We know that monks took great care to preserve the sacred teachings through memory; there are still traces of these oral methods and cues in Buddhist literature as it survives today. Stock phrases, metrical prose and verse, and recurring passages create a symmetry which, though tedious to the reader, would aid in exactness of recall for those holy words. (Cummings 1982: 8)

In Buddhist art, the form chosen to represent the act of teaching depicts the Buddha in a relaxed pose, using hand gestures to enumerate the Four Noble Truths, as shown in the photograph on the next page.

In a similar style, Theravada Buddhist monks rarely stand to teach, recite stories, or deliver sermons to a gathering of lay people. Rather, they are typically seated on a platform or decorated dais with listeners seated respectfully on mats before them. Graceful hand gestures are often employed to embellish the talk, but sweeping movements of the arms and extreme facial expressions are carefully avoided.

Because of the sheer size of the sacred texts (45 volumes in the Thai edition), it is both impractical and economically impossible for lay followers of Buddhism to possess individual copies. In traditional Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhist societies, the temple was normally the community library, where both sacred and secular literature were preserved and used primarily by literate monks and village elders.

Figure 2
Hands of The Teaching Buddha at The Peace Pagoda
Leverett, Massachusetts

Visual art, in the form of diagrams, painting, and sculpture served mainly to illustrate and reinforce teachings transmitted in the form of sermons, stories, and verses. Wall paintings often depict, in sequence, the life of the Buddha or scenes from well-known *Jataka* tales. The examples shown in Figure 3 are typical scenes from the life of the Buddha that often adorn temple walls.

In this particular instance, the scenes have been painted on canvas and hung from tent poles for a Cambodian-American family celebration on the grounds of a large apartment complex.

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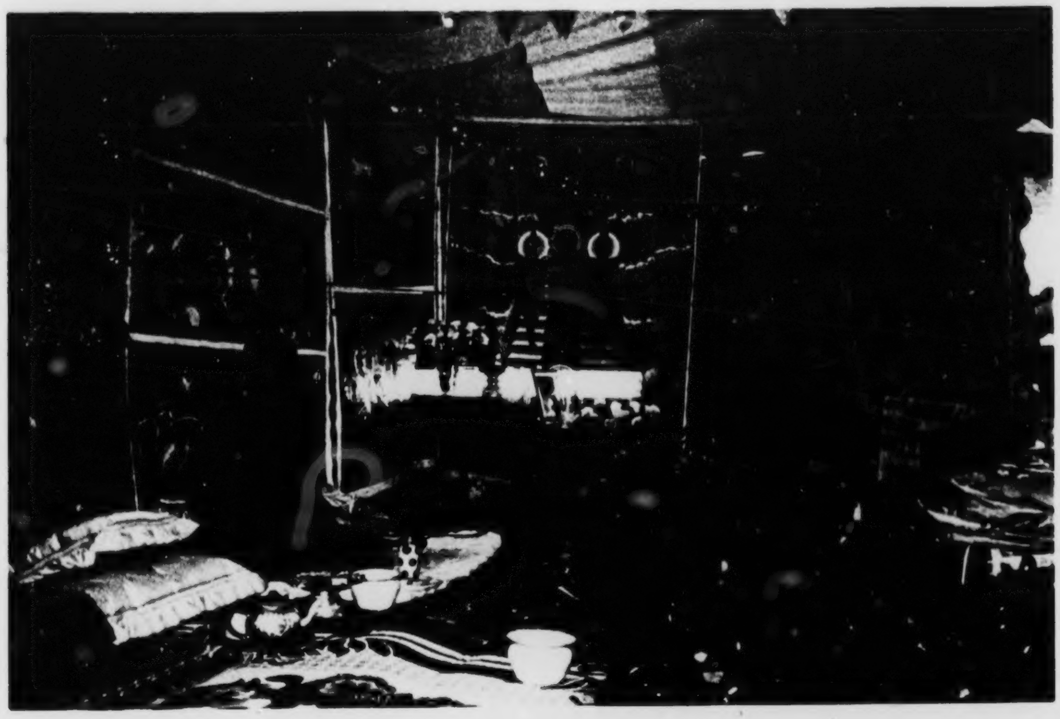

Figure 3
Portable Canvas Temple Art
in a Cambodian-American Immigrant Community

The "Wheel of Becoming" diagram is another example of Buddhist popular learning media familiar to lay people and monks alike. This elaborate 2000-year-old teaching aid (Khantipalo 1970:64) was once painted in the gateways of all Buddhist monasteries in India. The scenes that illustrate the wheel depict in minute detail the endless round of existence in the form of a large wheel. At the hub of the wheel are grotesque, human-like renderings of the three distractions to enlightenment, and the spokes divide the wheel into six divisions representing the realms of existence. In each of these realms, experience is depicted as varying degrees of pleasure or pain, depending on one's

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attachment to the worldly desires that obstruct the spiritual path.

Images of the Buddha found in temples, caves, and forest retreats may also be considered an aid to learning in that they are objects for establishing collectedness and avoiding distraction. The other major symbol of Buddhist visual art, the wheel, represents the infinitely dynamic quality of the *dhamma* in comparison to the static and illusory quality of temporal existence. Similarly, the carvings, temple architecture, stupas and Bodhi trees found on monastery grounds are media that are specifically intended enhance reflective meditation. In sum, they set the climate for entering the stream, and provide guidance for the seeker who wishes to experience truth first hand.

Points of Contrast and Convergence

The basis for comparing modern Western approaches to nonformal education with the Buddhist educational tradition lies partly in that there are a number of similarities as well as differences between them. When any development theory or its attendant set of educational practices is transplanted wholesale on a cultural system vastly different from the one in which it arose, conflicts or may arise that may ultimately result in its misinterpretation and rejection. On the other hand, there is much to be gained when educational theories and the practices they support can inform and enrich one another, particularly in situations where cultures have come into irreversible contact.

Whether these situations arise from radical change in political and economic systems or the gradual diffusion and assimilation of new philosophies, the challenge is always how to absorb that which is valuable in the new set of views while maintaining the integrity and viability of the old. In reference to the East-West dichotomy in approach to learning described earlier in this chapter, this challenge varies in intensity and urgency with each specific situation, ranging from the economic subjugation of Sri Lanka and Thailand to the rebuilding of Cambodia.

The question of whether and how to identify and integrate points of convergence between Eastern and Western thought system also applies to Southeast Asian refugee communities as they reconstruct their identity as Asian-Americans. What should or must be discarded? What can be directly applied? In what ways should some approaches be modified or reinterpreted? What can be shared?

Table 4 on the next page summarizes some of the key differences between two social philosophers whose ideas have been applied to social, economic, and educational reform. As the widely respected *guru* of adult nonformal education in international development circles, Paulo Friere has devoted a lifetime to constructing an approach to practice that offers an alternative to previously dominant Western models. Like Friere, Sulak Srivaraksa is a prominent intellectual and social activist who has established a philosophical position which confronts economic development models based on corporate greed and environmental destruction (Srivaraksa 1986; 1988; 1992). Unlike Freire, however, Srivaraksa's message challenges the wisdom of materialism as a desirable way of life, and seeks to revive traditional Thai Buddhist values in regard to social organization, ecology, and education.

Table 3

Comparison of Educational Contexts as Reflected in the Works of Paulo Freire and Sulak Srivaraksa

	Friere	Srivaraksa
Philosophical tradition	Marxist-humanist	Hindu-Buddhist
Epistemological assumptions	dialectical human relationship with concrete external reality as source of knowledge	human discovery of reality underlying existence as source of knowledge & wisdom
Categories of knowledge	(1) magical (2) real (concrete)	(1) mundane (2) supra-mundane
Learning objectives	revolutionary economic & social transformation	individual enlightenment & social reformation
Curriculum	structured cycle of reflection-action based on generative themes	self-directed open cycle of reflection and/or action based on *dhamma*
Teacher-learner relationships	equal learning partnership	teacher as respected elder
Learning media	representations of generative themes, learner-generated writing (testimony)	oral tradition (epic poetry, stories, parables) Pali canon, temple art & architecture
Role of literacy	creative, dynamic, individually empowering	preservational, residual

Standard economic development models for the Third World have served only to further subjugate and oppress the poor, to perpetuate their existence as a "culture of silence" (Friere 1989) in which they, as objects rather than subjects, have no control over the forces that shape their world. The objective of the approach proposed by Paulo Friere is to guide people in gaining the cognitive tools they need to overcome this situation, to gain control over their immediate environment and eventually over their oppressors and create a new, more equitable society. Oppressed groups are broadly defined in Friere's writings mainly by their economic and political situation, but may also include groups of individuals who suffer from all forms of oppression. The first step for any group of learners, who meet in "culture circles," is to face the reality of their oppression and identify its source. Having become critically conscious of their situation, they are in a position to gain control over it. The technical skill of literacy is the basic organizing and liberating tool in the empowerment process.

Srivaraksa's philosophy differs from that of Friere in his view of the relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world. While Buddhism stresses awareness of the interdependence of all beings and maintaining the natural ecological balance, Friere advocates the exploitation of nature, using its resources to overcome poverty and ignorance.

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Although Srivaraksa has not developed a specific plan for adult education, his criticism of the Thai secular education system, which was based on a British colonial model, echoes that of Friere:

> Our educational system teaches the young to admire urban life, the civil service, and the business world, and, as a result, we are "brain-draining" our rural areas...This new religion of consumerism exploits the minds and bodies of the young and is entirely dysfunctional. Modern Siam is an eroding society. (Srivaraksa 1992:5)

As a Buddhist scholar, Srivaraksa calls for a return to traditional cultural and religious values, yet as a modern social activist he seeks certain institutional reforms. Rather than revolution, Srivaraksa advocates reformation, incorporating rather than discarding or devaluing centuries-old beliefs and practices.

In spite of fundamental differences in what constitutes reality, there are several points at which the two philosophies converge. Notably, they both question the authority of the dominant economic systems in their respective societies, and both propose raising awareness among both rural and urban poor as a means of bringing about a more equitable society. Points where they diverge, as in the role of literacy and the nature of learning media, should be taken into account in the planning and facilitation of collaborative development efforts.

The three Asian models for adult community education described in Appendix A represent three approaches to the inclusion of local knowledge as the the main source for curriculum and materials design. Having incorporated traditional ways of learning to formulate and facilitate their objectives, these models offer examples of how the tide of exploitative relationships can be diverted into streams of mutually beneficial exchange.

As Srivaraksa has pointed out, Asian intellectuals and bureaucrats trained in the West often become more devoted to Western values than Westerners themselves, and therefore more anxious than their foreign counterparts to discard local knowledge in the frenzied quest for technological progress. In Southeast Asia, these attitudes have contributed toward the creation of an ever more impoverished and dependent underclass. Alternative approaches that acknowledge divergent world views and respect pre-existing learning modes may be instrumental in the creation of educational solutions that effectively parallel the peaceful history of Buddhist social reform.

Notes

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[1] See Joseph Campbell, The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and as Religion (New York:Harper Collins, 1988).

[2] According to these views, human knowledge is derived solely from one's experience of the physical world. Therefore, all metaphysical statements are meaningless because they cannot be verified.

[3] These two schools are generally known as Mahayana (the Great Vehicle) and Hinayana (the Small Vehicle), and are often referred to by Buddhists as "two sides of the same coin." Theravada, or "the teaching of the elders," is another name for the Hinayana branch, adheres more strictly to the Pali canon and its rules for monastic discipline, and is the form practice in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.

[4] How closely the Pali texts now translated into various languages, including English, replicate the actual words of the Buddha will never be known. The opening phrase of each discourse, "Thus I have heard," attests only to the fact that the recitative is an accurate reproduction of what was heard. Sri Lankan scholar Walpola Rahula describes the preservation by the Theras (elders) and their pupilary succession of the teachings for over four centuries before they were committed to writing was "a mode of collective recitation" designed to "keep the texts intact, free from change, modification or interpolation." It is likely that at least some of the clearly mnemonic devices in the texts, such as frequent repetitions and the use of categories, were added by the reciters as aids to memory. See Walpola Rahula, What Buddha Taught (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1959), p. 91.

[5] These rules are known collectively as the *Patimokha*, a section of the Pali canon which must be memorized by novices prior to full ordination. They cover not only the moral codes, but prescribe correct behavior for such matters as the correct draping of robes and personal hygiene.

[6] Pali is presumed to be the northern Indian dialect used by the Buddha, is today used exclusively for preservation of his teachings. Without a surviving script of its own, Pali has been encoded in a number of scripts, including Sinhalese, Burmese, and Kamboja. In Laos, sacred manuscripts are encoded in *tham* (the language of the *dhamma*).

CHAPTER IV

COMMUNITY EDUCATION IN RURAL LAOS

The world of the lowland Lao village, the home cultural context for the development of the various forms of *lam*, had remained relatively untouched by foreign influences throughout much of its history, with the notable exception of the spread of a popular form of Theravada Buddhism from Ceylon via the scholar monks of the royal court at Angkor.

Until the mid-twentieth century, when the massive disruptions precipitated by the post-colonial power vacuum spread throughout the area, the Lao village network had existed in relative peace as a loose association of autonomous communities which shared a common language and culture. Its inhabitants were only sporadically aware, probably through the news shared by traders, boatmen and itinerant *moh lam*, of the activities and quarrels of their royalty with neighboring principalities and kingdoms.

However, the catastrophic events that followed the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the invasion of northern Laos by the Vietnamese, and the American economic and military intervention combined to disrupt age-old patterns of living forever, except perhaps in those villages fortunate enough to be located far enough away from the battlefields, the destruction zones, and the social reorganization programs implemented by both sides during the struggle.

The propaganda war and the escalation of hostilities eventually culminated in the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam and the formation of the Lao Democratic People's Republic (LPDR) in 1975, resulting the flight of approximately 300,000 refugees across the Mekong to an uncertain future. As documented in the reflections of refugees and the tales of *moh lam* in America (Chapters 6 and 7), these events and their effects are still in the process of being reconstructed, explained, and interpreted as recent personal and community history.

As the home culture for first generation Lao refugees in the United States, the world of the lowland Lao villager prior to the escalation of this conflict forms the basis of the collective memory of a displaced community in the process of restructuring its identity. The intervening disruptions - the forced removals, military conscription and porterage, the devastation of villages during the air war, the refuge in caves and underground, the incarceration in "re-education camps" - all of these experiences are also part of the refugee story. However, among the adult population born before 1960, references to what it means to be Lao invariably return to the world of the peaceful village.

As the cultural and linguistic context which gave birth to present forms of *lam*, a description of selected aspects of this world is relevant to its potential as an educational medium in the post-migration context.

Historical Background

The following description begins with the origin and development of lowland Lao agricultural communities in the Mekong valley which replaced the indigenous population as the dominant culture of the area and led to the emergence of a distinct social, linguistic, and political, and religious identity (*muang lao*) which plays a central role in the self-definition of Lao communities in the modern world.

Early Migration and Settlement

The present day lowland Lao are among the descendants of the T'ai peoples who migrated southward over a period of some seven centuries from the kingdom of Nan Chao in southwestern China. This long, slow migration is believed to have resulted from increasingly militant Chinese political and cultural domination over the T'ai, and the eventual destruction of Nan Chao in the thirteenth century A.D. by the Mongols, under the leadership of the fabled Kublai Khan (Roberts 1967). Thus the early settlement of the areas that were to become Laos and Thailand were the direct result of a gradual but forced migration.

As the migrants gradually established their loosely associated network of settlements along the banks of the Mekong and its tributaries, the indigenous peoples were edged upland, where they have continued to subsist on a combination of hunting, gathering, and the cultivation of swidden rice. Derogatorily called *kha* (savages or slaves) by the early migrants, the descendants of these original inhabitants are more respectfully known as *lao theung*, or Lao of the mountainsides. They currently make up approximately one third of the population of modern Laos.

The lowland Lao settled in permanent villages, mainly along the river banks, basing their economy cultivation of wet rice supplemented by fishing, hunting, and vegetable gardening. Their religious practices surrounded their belief in a pantheon of spirits (*phi*), which inhabited all corners of the natural world, and to whose volition all events in the course of human existence could be attributed.

Although no written records of village life during this period exist, it is evident from the descriptions written by European travelers that the technologies for building pirogues and constructing elaborate temples from brick and stone were well developed by the 17th century (Levy 1959: 56), as were the arts of metalworking and sculpture. It is also evident that the Lao were skilled in producing woven silk, candles, and fireworks. Bamboo, benzoin, and sticklac were also produced, both for local use and for trade with neighboring principalities.[1] Later accounts (Mohout 1864; LeBoulanger 1889; Reinach 1907) attest to the fact that villagers also cultivated cotton and tobacco, practiced small animal husbandry, and raised water buffalo to work in the rice fields. For transportation, the Lao were adept at navigating the rivers and had developed a network of footpaths and wider trails which provided passage for oxcarts and elephants.

Although it is not certain how long the construction and use of of musical instruments have been part of lowland Lao village culture, it is claimed that a Chinese instrument known as the *cheng* was adapted from the Lao *khaen* "at a far distant time" (Danielou, n.d.). It is therefore reasonable to assume that from the time of the very earliest settlements in the Mekong Valley, the Lao had achieved the three pillars of their identity as expressed in the popular adage, "the Lao are people who eat sticky (glutinous) rice, live in houses built on piles, and play the *khaen*."

In the course of time, influences from abroad brought about changes in the way the people who inhabited the network of settlements along the Mekong interacted with their world. The first, and probably the deepest, of these was the growing popularity of a religion which appealed not only to the rulers of the early Lao principalities, but also to the ruled.

Enter the Yellow Robe

By the eighth century A.D., Buddhist doctrine had been introduced into the upper Mekong valley as a result of trade routes with the ancient kingdom of Dvarati, which flourished from the sixth to the 13th centuries,[2] and whose inhabitants were "fervent Buddhists" (Dommen 1985:12). It is doubtful however, that that any early missions, of which stone images of the Buddha and carved Mon inscriptions survive as evidence, had more than a limited following in the larger river settlements. Religious rites remained centered primarily on the traditional worship and propitiation of nature spirits until the official importation and propagation of Buddhism in the 14th century.

By this time, the lowland Lao village network, connected by seasonal river and land transportation, supported the first Lao principality at Moung Swa (Dommen 1985:12), the ancient name for present day Luang Prabang. The rulers of this new principality became increasingly powerful, resulting eventually in the unification of a vast area that became known as the Kingdom of Lan Xang, translated as the Kingdom of A Million Elephants, which included all of present-day Laos and northeastern Thailand. Lan Xang remained a dominant power in the region for approximately 350 years, an era regarded by modern Lao as their golden age, which produced many of the legends and symbols that represent Lao unity and culture to present-day refugees in America.[3]

Little is known about life at the village level during this period other than what has been passed from generation to generation through folk tales, myths, and legends. The birth in 1316 of prince Fa Ngum, founder of the Kingdom of Lan Xang, is the first fixed event in recorded Lao history (Dommen 1985:13). Having been exiled from the Lao city of Muong Swa as a result of his father's marital infidelity, the young prince was raised in the royal court at Angkor, which was then ruled by the great Buddhist king, Jayavarman Paramesvara. Under the tutelage of a Buddhist monk and scholar (Coedes 1959:20),the young prince undoubtedly became acquainted with the Pali canon, the Khmer writing system, and the great Indian epics which had, along with other motifs from Indian culture, permeated the civilization at Angkor for at least ten centuries (Keyes 1977:66)

Between 1340 and 1350, Fa Ngum returned to Muong Swa in command of a massive army of Khmer. Having already conquered Chieng Mai, Vieng Chan (Vientiane), and most of the Korat plateau, he established Muong Swa as the royal capital the new Kingdom of Lan Xang, of which he was crowed sovereign in 1353.

Buddhist teachings had already made their way into the Mekong valley long before establishment of Lan Xang, but Fa Ngum and his son Same Sen Thai (r. 1373-1416) were the first to actively promote the Khmer form of Theravada Buddhism as the state religion:

> For when Fa Ngum became King he sent for his old master, and the latter came at the head of a group of monks and artisans bringing with him the famous statue of the Buddha which is known by the name of Phra Bang, whence the capital took its name. (Coedes 1959:21)

These two monarchs are also given credit for establishing a vast network of village pagodas which set into motion a major social reform movement (Abhay 1959; Roberts 1967; Keyes 1977; Dommen 1985) that left an indelible mark on lowland Lao culture. According to a temple document preserved from 1602, it was actually the appeal of Fa Ngum's wife, Nang Keo, that convinced him to dispatch Buddhist monks into the countryside because, in the aftermath of military unification, the soldiers had run amok in the countryside and were oppressing the villagers. So she appealed to her husband:

> I can see that no doctrine is followed, no rules are obeyed, nor any practices either. The strong oppress the weak, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. (tr. Pavie 1959:403).

The king responded by dispensing materials for the construction of temples throughout the land, complete with sacred trees, and providing for the training of local monks. From that time on, according to the document, "the villages were very generous and very good" (tr. Pavie 1959:403).

It is reasonable to surmise that cultural transition brought about by the spread of a philosophical system with a set of discourses on right conduct at its center brought with it unifying and moderating influences. Unlike the monotheistic religions, Buddhism had the capacity to establish hegemony, yet accommodate pre-existing animist beliefs and practices. By the coronation of the pious "Sun King," Chao Souligna Vongsa (1654-1694) was coronated, there were some seventy temples and a school of Buddhist Culture and Arts in Vieng Chan and, if one rapturous reflection on the piety of village life can be believed, the temple had become the very heart and soul of every village community:

> In the smallest of villages, night and day, the gongs would never fail to strike the hours. Every seventh day, the people flocked to the temples. Everyone aspired to the merit of giving and the monks received these alms with pure hands and righteous hearts. They knew the Texts and the rites, the life and the Buddha and the Doctrine....they would be consulted on every occasion of everyday life: about birth, sickness, death, dreams and the omens of the sky. They would answer either in parables or quote the Sayings of the Master, their advice was scrupulously followed and respected. (Abhay 1959:239)

The years that followed the death King Souligna saw the division of Lan Xang into three separate states - Luang Prabang, Vieng Chan, and Champassak, which precipitated a series of ill-fated military ventures lasting over a century. The eventual outcome was the establishment of Siamese suzerainty over the Lao territories, with only the once powerful Kingdom of Luang Prabang left with a measure of its former autonomy. By the middle of the 19th century, as the French under the government of Napoleon III were first launching their colonial enterprise in Southeast Asia (Dommen 1985:25), the former Kingdom of Lan Xang had disintegrated into a collection of territories under Siamese provincial administration.

Lao Identity in Historical Perspective

The extent to which this series of power shifts affected life in villages far distant from the warring royal capitals was probably minimal, since the Thais, like their French successors, tended to concentrate their energy on controlling the cities and larger market towns. One event which did infringe on the lives of large numbers of the rural population was the forced migration of entire villages across the Mekong in the early 19th century. This was mounted by the Siamese in retaliation for a failed attempt by the Lao army to mount an attack against Bangkok (Dommen 1985). Although the displaced Lao eventually returned to their homes on the left bank, the Thai territorial claim to the former Lao territories were well established (Toye 1968:24), and the era of peaceful coexistence enjoyed by the Lao since the reign of Fa Ngum was ended.

Throughout the turbulent history of the area, villagers were able to shift loyalties in deference to new territorial conquests without necessarily altering their sense of identity as Lao. According to one Lao historian, (Sasorith 1959) the descendents of the people of Lan Xang have never stopped thinking of themselves as a single "geographical and moral" entity (1959:30) despite the breakup of the Kingdom's political power structure. This can be explained, he writes, by the dual application of the Lao term *mouong*, which means both "country" and "town":

> It may apply to the whole of the a country or merely to any fairly densely populated urban district of a certain size. This explains why the word *muong* has, in every day language, come to be synonymous with city, district, or region...it is clear, therefore, that even when *muong* Luang-Prabang, *muong* Vientiane, and *muong* Champassak had each a separate existence, *muong* Lao nonetheless remained *muong* Lao. (Sasorith 1959:29)

As a modern example, the Thai-Lao village of Ban Phran Muan in Udorn province, was the site of an ethnographic study by anthropologist J.S. Tambiah in 1961. After extensive fieldwork, Tambiah described the village world as "a sharply perceived social universe" (Tambiah 1970:25) which was basically inward-looking, and which had "passed into and out of the control of waxing and waning kingdoms" with little perceptible change in self-identity.

There is, therefore, a strong argument that the Lao provinces and villages retained their cultural identity as well as a large measure of their political autonomy throughout the pre-colonial and colonial era, and that it was their common language, culture, and religion that bound them together as a widely dispersed, yet clearly distinct, community. This strong sense of ethnic identification in spite of limited and infrequent communications may well have contributed to the persistence of traditional beliefs and practices through the period of colonial occupation and protracted war.

On a visit in 1968 to a Thai *isaan* village in Loey province, which was only accessible by foot from the main road during the dry season, I was struck by the fact that the villagers had no concept of either Thai or Lao nationhood, nor did they have much interest in what lay beyond the mountains, other than as the source of manufactured products (watches, detergent, carbonated drinks). They did, however, identify themselves as *phasason* *lao* (Lao people) by virtue of the language they spoke and the fact that they consumed mainly glutinous rice. This particular village had, up until that time, been spared the homogenizing influences of Thai national development efforts, and had also remained relatively impervious to the propaganda activities of the *pathet lao*.

In another illustration of the self-contained nature of the Lao village world, an editor of the Chalermnit Press in Bangkok, after an extended trip to Laos, wrote in 1961 that "they (the villagers) live quite a separate life...quite often they do not know they name of their country, who rules over them and who are their provincial governors." (Battle of Vientiane 1961:B). Incredibly, as late as 1990, after 15 years of life under the revolutionary government, a Western diplomat in Laos commented that outside Vientiane, "most people don't even know that Laos no longer has a king" (Heibert 1990).

The sense of historical connection with a place *(muong lao)* and ethnic identity *(phasason lao)* rather than with a modern state or political entity is thus, at the village level, stronger than any sense of national loyalty. This way of defining themselves also allows the Lao to accommodate external influences by co-existing with other cultural and political systems whenever necessary for survival.

The series of events which gave birth to modern Laos must therefore be understood in the context of external interventions which, until the most recent period, had very little effect on village culture, and gained virtually no influence over the traditional educational and communication systems already flourishing in *muong lao*. The nature of the persistence of *muong lao* in the collective consciousness of the Lao before migration also helps explain its recasting and survival in the context of the world outside Southeast Asia.

French Colonial Period (1893-1953)

The French protectorate over the area that is now Laos was formalized in 1893 when vice consul Auguste Pavie convinced the royal court at Luang Prabang that France had the best interests of the Lao monarch at heart (Roberts 1966: 27). As part of the agreement, under which Laos gained legal status as a modern nation-state, the Lao king formally abandoned any claim to sovereignty over the Korat Plateau, where approximately twelve million ethnic Lao presently live, in contrast to 1.7 million in the Democratic People's Republic of Laos.

As a general rule, the French administrators did little to change the social and economic structure of life outside the cities and market towns, a fact which, in retrospect, is alternately deplored and praised. On the one hand, the French are criticized for drawing the borders of Laos as a modern nation state and ruling it for half a century, but failing to contribute toward its economic, social, and political development (Champassak 1961; Stuart-Fox 1982; Proudfoot 1990). On the other, the colonial presence is credited with having initiated and maintained an era of peace in which traditional ways of life were allowed to flourish among the lowland Lao as well as among the hill peoples (Toye 1968; Champassak 1961). In general, it is agreed that for better or for worse, French rule "rested lightly on Laos," (Roberts 1966:27) with the only changes at the village level being the occasional appearance of a tax collector and the possible construction of a secular primary school.

The stage was set for the final act of French rule over Laos during during World War II, when most of the country was under the control of the Vichy government and Luang Prabang was occupied by Japanese military commanders. It was during this occupation that the Lao liberation movement (*lao issara*) was organized under the leadership of Prince Petsarath. After the war, the French reinvigorated their effort to set up a network of secular schools and medical facilities in the countryside, but these plans were soon foiled by the growing resistance to colonial domination throughout French Indochina.

The period of political instability and civil war which followed created a situation in which some lowland Lao communities were directly caught up in the conflict while others were left unscathed, depending on the externally determined strategic value of their location.

However, the home context to which older Lao immigrants in America nostalgically refer, and which they recreate through stories told to their children, temple ceremonies,

ceremonies, and community festivals, is not the world of poltical upheaval and armed conflict. The village origins of adult *lao loum* refugees who fled across the Mekong after 1975, which is to say the world they knew before "communists," "A.I.D.," or "phosphorous bombs" became part of the popular vocabulary, was the peaceful network of village communities as they had existed prior to any of the major economic and social upheavals eventually brought about by the intervention of foreign geopolitical interests. However, the events which were to unfold during the next period, over which villagers had little or no control, altered the course of many of their lives forever.

Legacy of Conflict (1954-1975)

The recent history of Laos is the tragic story of a people unwillingly and irrevocably caught up in the escalating violence of an international war commanded from the foreign capitals in whose interests it was waged. In large areas of Laos, the massive physical destruction of the countryside and the unrelenting psychological campaigns promoted by the perpetrators of the conflict conspired to disrupt centuries old traditions and the harmonious life patterns that had been established preserved through the Buddhist *dhamma*.

Official independence from France (October 22, 1953), was followed by a succession of attempts by competing political factions, including the *lao issara* and the *pathet* *lao*, to establish a national coalition under the umbrella of a neutralist national government. Under the agreement reached on October 16, 1957, signed by Prince Souvanna Phouma and his half-brother Prince Souvannouvong, a National Union government was formed, which forbade military alliances with any foreign country. This agreement also called for the integration of *pathet lao* combat units with the national army, and established the pro-communist *neo lao hak sat* as a legitimate political party (Champassak 1961:58-59).

Tragically, the 1957 accords failed to usher in the "pax Lao" its writers had intended. In the aftermath of Dien Bien Phu , the leaders of the Indochinese Communist Party based in Hanoi "were not reconciled to an independent Laos outside their orbit" (Dommen 1985:49). Washington was equally dissatisfied with the arrangement in that it gave the *neo lao hak sat* a legitimate role in the Lao national government. The State Department, led by Secretary of State Dulles, "considered the agreements an important victory for the Communists in that part of Asia and a defeat of its own policy in Laos" (Champassak 1961:60).

While initially reluctant to intervene directly during this period, the United States became increasingly committed to a policy of confrontation by supplying military aid and stepping up economic development efforts in areas controlled by the royalists. Thus, even in many areas not directly affected by the fighting, the lives of villagers were subject to externally motivated change. The extent of organizational and educational changes in villages under *pathet lao* control has been reported by Chapelier (1970) and later by Chagnon & Rumpf (1982), while parallel changes under the Royal Lao Government are the subject of several studies and reports compiled by USAID. The major difference in the two approaches appears to be that organizational change and social reform under the Pathet Lao was initiated and sustained using existing practices as the structural base (Chapelier 1970:12-13) while villages under RLG control received only sporadic attention as it occasionally trickled down the byways of U.S.-sponsored development programs. Most of the economic and social changes were felt, instead, in the towns and provincial capitals. According to Thippavong, these changes were not without their effects in villages which had regular contacts with the market towns:

> Because contact has been established, the peasant villagers, in some cases, are no longer self-sufficient in their moral or intellectual life. They know of, and gradually have become dependent upon more technologically advanced people. Even though they still love and are attached to their native soil, they appreciate and envy the life in town. (Thippavong 1966:37)

Thus in the early stages of the conflict, *lao loum* villages with the good fortune to lie far enough away from the relatively isolated combat zones and the provincial centers of trade were able to maintain much of their autonomy and preserve traditional lifestyles. Others underwent major economic and political changes resulting in various forms of indoctrination, reorganization, economic restructuring and cultural change.

The breakdown of the 1957 agreements, encouraged by pressure from Hanoi, assistance from the Viet Minh, and finally by massive economic and military involvement by the United States led to full-scale civil war. In 1962, a second neutralist government under Prince Souvanna Phouma was established under the Geneva Accords with the support of the United States. This change in policy, brought about by President Kennedy, was based on a realistic assessment of Pathet Lao military strength and belief that only a neutralist coalition could realistically maintain the balance of power in Laos (Dommen, 1985:71). Sadly, this agreement was also short lived, and by 1964 was openly and continuously violated by both sides. The massive escalation which followed took an unprecedented toll in human life, devastated the natural environment, and precipitated the world-wide diaspora of refugees.

On the Royal Lao Government side, supply operations and air strikes by the CIA and its contractors (Dommen 1985:91) were well underway by the early 1960's, and in 1965, the U.S. Air Force began supplying direct military support of royalist forces on the Plain of Jars. Systematic bombing of the military convoy network known as the "Ho Chi Minh Trail" commenced in January, 1965 from bases in Thailand, as did the bombing of civilian targets in areas controlled by the Pathet Lao, beginning in 1964 and continuing through 1973.

During this nine-year period, the United States Air Force dropped a total of 2,093,100 tons of ordnance over *pathet lao* controlled areas, or one planeload of bombs every eight minutes. The period of most intensive bombing (1968-69) which created at least 700,000 refugees within Laos, prompted one U.S Air Force pilot to remark "There just aren't any villages in northern Laos any more" (U.S. Senate Hearings 1971:2). Violence perpetrated by Pathet Lao and Viet Minh forces during the same period took the form of assassinations, intimidation killings, and forced conscription (Champassak 1961; Toye 1968).

During the post-colonial period, the degree of Western influence over social and economic life in Laos was determined by the proximity of a community to a major town or provincial capital. However, in the protracted period of intense conflict that accompanied large scale intervention, complex international geopolitical strategies decided in Washington, Moscow, and Hanoi decided which villages received economic aid, which were propagandized, which were obliterated, and which were left alone.

As in other realms, the extent to which the home village of a particular family of *lao loum* refugees now living in the United States had departed from traditional ways of learning and knowing depended mainly on where the village happened to be located. At one extreme, the Lao village network inhabiting the fertile Plain of Jars was virtually wiped out by American air attacks from 1964-69, and their surviving populations relocated to refugee camps in and around Vientiane. At the other, villages under RLG control closer to Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Savannakhet were only intermittently and benignly exposed to ideological warfare in the guise of progressive change.

Consequently, the memories that many refugees have brought with them to America have been filled not only with nostalgia for the peaceful villages of their early childhood, but also with the nightmares of their youth and early adulthood. Since refugee communities in America are typically comprised of people not only from the diverse ethnic groups of Laos, but also from different regions, the nature of their memories vary widely, often leading to the symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress and clinical depression (Boehnlein 1987; Krich 1989). However painful the recent past, however, Lao refugees who share village origins most often recall and relive the spiritual aspects of *muong Lao*, of the glorious past which had existed long before the war. This collective memory plays an important role as the foundations of new communities (Muecke 1987), albeit in a physical and social environment entirely different from the context of their shared experience.

Among the features of this longer term past which Lao-American communities seem anxious to keep alive are the close family and community relationships characteristic of village life, the cycle of Buddhist festivals, economic autonomy through cooperative work exchange (Sen 1987), and the rhythms of their ancestors through the remembrance and performance of ritual, dance, music, and song.

Village Life and Customs

As portrayed by twentieth century Western travelers and social scientists, a typical *lao loum* village in pre-revolutionary Laos was composed of between twenty and fifty households. Virtually all aspects of life in these settlements were connected in some way to the demands of wet-rice agriculture. With a diet of glutinous rice supplemented by fishing, hunting, the raising of small animals, and vegetable gardening, villages were economically self-sufficient and had little reason to form or maintain frequent contacts with the outside world. Thompson (1937) felt that because the Mekong was such an unreliable means of communication, the Lao society was really made up of "totally independent village groups, which could only be united under a powerful neighboring state or when kings could achieve a confederation" (HRAF 363:101). While this may have been true from a strictly economic standpoint at the time, the *lao loum* concept of community (*sangkhom*) extended beyond the immediate boundaries of the village unit in that each settlement formed part of the larger structure of the historic *muong lao,* united by a common language and replicating an organizational structure represented by, among other things, the Buddhist *sangha*.

As the French and later the American economic presence took hold in the river towns, the demand for various manufactured goods began to grow (Kaufmann 1961; Halpern 1964; Orr 1967), and such articles as bicycles, radios, kerosene lanterns, carbonated drinks, cigarettes, toothbrushes, plastic buckets, and watches became commonplace by the late 1950's.

Reminiscences by Lao refugees confirm strong feelings of integration with the natural world in often poignant glimpses of the world they left behind. Many such reflections were quoted by Fred Branfman in his crusade (1970-71) to stop the bombing of the Plain of Jars.

> My childhood was in harmony with nature among the gardens, the fields, and the mountains. I was part of my village.(as quoted in Branfman 1971:107)

The annual cycle of preparing the fields, sowing, transplanting, and harvesting the rice, in which the whole village participated, was "the traditional rhythm of our ancestors" (1971:107). In the words of a Lao proverb, "The rice is in our blood, which makes us all one family." (Buddhism in Laos, n.d.:2). This time of all-out communal effort followed by weeks of celebration is remembered fondly in the testimony of a formerly prosperous farmer:

> When it came time to work in the fields, we went to work together. We shared the labor in a fulfilling way for us young people. When the field work was finished, we joined in the yearly festivities with the sounds of singing, dancing, and laughter. (as quoted in Branfman 1972:58)

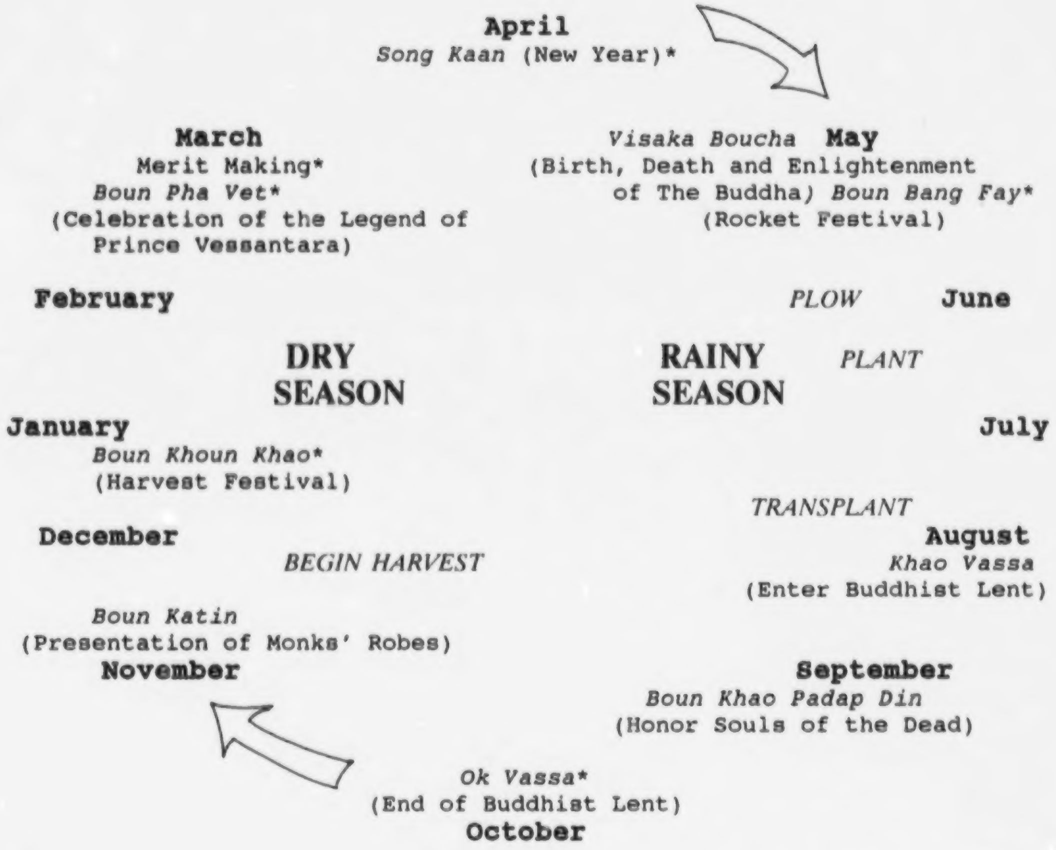
As a social unit, the village community was a relatively homogeneous society in which there was little differentiation based on class or wealth (Kaufman 1961:18). Goods and services were routinely bartered, and the accumulation of individual wealth was discouraged. Chapelier (1970) wrote that in the Lao village:

> People are bound to each other by a loose kinship relationship. Solidarity and reciprocal behavior are the key values that motivate relationships, and the nuclear family is the most significant working unit. (Chapelier 1970:13)

In the traditional Lao world view, there was no clear distinction between the material and spiritual worlds, as there tends to be in post-industrial societies (Tambiah 1968). The social and economic context of the Lao village was indistinguishable from its spiritual life; the practical aspects of both Buddhist rituals and animist practices incorporated all levels of material, spiritual, and intellectual concerns.

The Annual Cycle of Festivals

In the lowland Lao village world, the conditions and timing of educational activities were determined largely by the exigencies of the annual agricultural cycle. The calendar of festivals also coincided closely with the planting, growing, and harvesting of rice, which in turn was determined by the arrival and departure of the annual rains.


April
Song Kaan (New Year)*
May
Visaka Boucha (Birth, Death and Enlightenment of The Buddha)
*Boun Bang Fay** (Rocket Festival)
PLOW
June
PLANT
RAINY SEASON
July
TRANSPLANT
August
Khao Vassa (Enter Buddhist Lent)
September
Boun Khao Padap Din (Honor Souls of the Dead)
*Ok Vassa** (End of Buddhist Lent)
October
Boun Katin (Presentation of Monks' Robes)
November
BEGIN HARVEST
December
January
*Boun Khoun Khao** (Harvest Festival)
DRY SEASON
February
March
Merit Making*
*Boun Pha Vet** (Celebration of the Legend of Prince Vessantara)

*high points in *moh lam* performance season

Figure 4
The Annual Cycle of Religious Festivals
Based on Traditional Wet Rice Agriculture

Grounded in pre-Buddhist traditions, these annual festivals provided occasions for the community to seek assurance that the "great transformation in the realm of nature which are essential for the proper growth of crops" (Reynolds 1978: 167) would actually occur. In this way, faith in the power of Buddhist ritual to control the sometimes unruly spirits was seasonally affirmed.

The cycle of Buddhist festivals in the *lao loum* village world would begin with the New Year celebration in April, before the onset of the rainy season. During the lengthy and elaborate festivities, rituals symbolizing renewal and fertility would be performed, as were dances to commemorate the legendary ancestors of *muong lao*. *Visakha boucha* (the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha) at the full moon of May is celebrated throughout the Buddhist world. In Laos, religious holidays such as *Visakha boucha* also provided occasion for local rites such as *boun bang fay* (the festival of rockets), an uproarious celebration accompanied by spontaneous displays which were capable of shocking European visitors:

> Amidships there are sometimes musicians, with kene, gong, and tom-tom, and two or three trained men who, their belts adorned with enormous jointed 'lingams,' dance the 'Phallic' standing up with their feet on the edges of the pirogue and declaim occasional odes and improvisations the terms of which are extremely crude. In their songs they invite beings, plants, and elements to unite, combine and fertilize one another so as to maintain 'Life' in all its forms on the surface of the earth. (Reinach 1901, HRAF 149:170)

Plowing would begin soon after the rains had arrived and softened the ground sufficiently, usually in late May or early June (Kaufman 1961:4). Around six weeks later the young seedlings would be transplanted at regular intervals in the rain soaked paddies, a labor intensive task involving all able-bodied villagers except for the resident monk and possibly, the village schoolteacher.

At the full moon of July, the more somber rites of *khao vassa*, the beginning of the Buddhist Lent, was observed. *Vassa* is a three-month period of reflection and seclusion for monks, and a time when young men enter the *wat* as temporary novices. Its conclusion in October would usher in another major period of joyous festivities associated with the harvest in December and January. Certain of these, notably the *boun khoun khao* (harvest festival), would be privately sponsored by a villager in celebration of a bountiful harvest. Others are obligatory annual celebrations which have their origins in the sacred Buddhist texts.

The most widely known and celebrated of these is *boun Pha Vet*, which is based on the 547th and last *Jataka* tale (*Vessantara Jataka*), and in Laos is celebrated in the third month of the lunar year (February), well after the harvest and long before the onset of the next rainy season. As a forum for community education, this festival provides the occasion for an annual reaffirmation of cultural values that pervaded Lao village life. The ceremony features an extended reading of the exemplary life of Prince Vessantara, the

Buddha-to-be, whose legendary charity lies at the heart of the Lao social ethics.

The proliferation of festivities during the period from October through February, then culminating with the celebration of the Buddhist new year in April, made sense in terms of the less intensive demands of the rice-growing cycle. It was also during these periods of lighter activity in the rice fields that community education in the form of religious training, meditative retreats, apprenticeships, public sermons, and *moh lam* performances, often in connection with the temple festivities, would abound.

Community Based Educational Systems

Long before the introduction of secular school systems and foreign development projects, every Lao village that could support one had a *wat*, presided over by an abbot, who served as moral leader, adviser on practical affairs, and schoolteacher. As in other Southeast Asian Buddhist cultures, the *wat* was the center of intellectual, spiritual and social life of a typical village community, as well as the library for its religious texts, medical references, tax documents and census reports (Buddhism in Laos, n.d.:2). Long-term members of the *sangha* were both moral leaders and educators responsible for the spiritual health of the village, as well as for the continued production and protection of the sacred texts.

Traditional Literacy

> Until the school system - still poor - can be expanded and improved, most Lao will continue to learn their history from the tales of priests and songs of balladeers. (LeBar 1960:38)

Knowledge of the world was transferred from parent to child, from expert to apprentice, from monk to novice, and from visitor to resident primarily through the spoken or sung word. Although literacy was held in high regard, (Wilder 1972; Tambiah 1968), it was considered a necessity only for monks and, to a lesser degree, village leaders. It was, as Tambiah asserts, the vehicle for preservation of ancient knowledge, and was not generally used as a tool for self-expression, interpersonal communication, or the recording of official events:

> Writing was incised on palm leaves with a sharp instrument; ink or black powder was applied and then rubbed off, leaving the scratches filled and visible; the leaves were then strung together to form a book. In elaborate books the leaf edges were gilded or painted in vermilion and the leaves put between lacquered or painted wooden covers. (Tambiah 1968:91)

The sacred texts, ritual formulas, and astrological reference works preserved in this fashion were constantly being recopied, either by monks or former monks, since their deterioration was relatively rapid. A second type of manuscript was written with Chinese ink on a long strip of natural yellow-white cardboard. Cardboard manuscripts also allowed for illustration and diagrams, and some of the astrological texts were written in this form.

Tatooing offered another medium for the literate transfer of practical knowledge. Although this form of literacy has received little scholarly attention, its use for recording specialized knowledge was probably widespread, as one traveler observed in 1924:

> There was even one fellow whose whole back was covered with a lesson in arithmetic or geometry, even trigonometry for all I know, as if a small brother had used him for a slate. (Franck 1924, HRAF 328:29)

Until the introduction of mechanical printing in Thailand and Laos, painstakingly incised palm-leaf manuscripts were the main texts, and were available only to monks and former monks for the purpose of teaching, sermonizing, or performing rituals. The popular transfer of knowledge was, as emphasized above, overwhelmingly oral.

This tradition continues in the refugee community in America, where in the midst of a society imbued with literacy, modes of communication at temple ceremonies remain primarily oral. None of the extensive chants in which the congregation is expected to participate are written, and no printed schedule of events or responses is distributed. Announcements of each event are, however, typed in Lao script and duplicated for mailing, together with an accounting of the funds raised at each event. Temples in the United States are also repositories for Lao religious texts and literature, although in printed rather than manuscript form. The tradition of the abbot formally reading aloud a *sutta*, *Jataka* tale, or a sermon at the end of each ceremony remains the central educational aspect of the event, followed by a blessing and the sharing of food.

Religious Instruction

Traditional avenues for achieving basic literacy were to (1) attend a pagoda school as a child or (2) enter the *wat* in a more formal relationship, as a *dek wat* (temple boy) or later as a novice. The first arrangement allowed for the basic education of girls as well as boys, although few actually attended. Traditionally, few women sought to achieve basic literacy at any age, although according to the account of a female *moh lam* (Compton 1979:111), it was also possible to learn the basics through informal apprenticeship arrangements with monks at the village *wat*. Group lessons at the pagoda schools, usually taught by the resident monk in the open courtyard of the temple, were not compulsory, and there were no examinations or grades. The main objective was to teach the children the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Lessons were learned primarily by choral recitation and memorization (Tambiah 1968). As a *dek wat* entering the temple at the age or nine or ten, a boy was also subject to a regimen of discipline, service, and more intensive learning on religious matters by the abbot or by his individual *khru* (*guru* or teacher).

Traditionally, the first writing system learned by new literates of any age at the pagoda schools was the *tham* script, in which the sacred texts were preserved, and in which the palm-leaf manuscripts were inscribed. According to Tambiah, both lay learners and novice monks learned first to chant prayers in Pali, then learned the *tham* letters in which the prayers and were inscribed. The Lao script was introduced only after basic literacy in *tham* had been achieved (Tambiah, 1968).

Young men could either enter the temple as temporary novices during *Vassa* (Buddhist Lent) or take up a path of learning and discipline which would eventually qualify them to become ordained as full-fledged monks. This committed the novice to a more formal learning track, for which the ideal curriculum included the study of the religious texts, Lao literature, herbal medicine, geography, and calligraphy.

This curriculum was not rigidly imposed by a central Buddhist hierarchy, but rather each *wat* followed it to the extent it was able. The chief priority was to teach the basic elements of Pali, some arithmetic, and to give the novice an oral grounding in Buddhist doctrine (Tambiah 1968: 79), together with instruction in the rules of monastic discipline. The mode of learning was mainly oral repetition, memorization and recall, leading to an examination in which the novice was required to prepare for an examination which would prove that he was versed in the precepts and doctrines of the religion. A great deal of the monk's training after ordination consists of "enlarging his repertoire of chants" (Tambiah, 1968:105) as well as in methods of administering to the laity. The art of meditation was taught experientially, as were the practical crafts of calligraphy and illustration.

Apprenticeships

Another type of learning arrangement was a kind of master-apprentice relationship in which the role of the *wat* was more like that of resource center than formal learning institution. Tambiah's description of such a relationship tells the history of the village medical expert *(moh yaa)*. As a young man, the doctor had received basic literacy and religious training as a monk, and had left the temple at the age of 23. Later, at the age of 30, he started to learn medicine from his uncle, and was considered qualified only "many years" later, after his uncle died. During his apprenticeship, the young man was taken repeatedly into to the forest and introduced to the various medicinal roots and herbs. He was also given medical texts dealing with such problems as digestive disorders, childbirth, tuberculosis, and venereal disease. Procedural knowledge was also acquired through experience, as he assisted his uncle in the treatment of patients.

After practicing medicine for some years, the doctor elected to study once again - this time to become a *moh phrawm*, or spiritual healer, a position which would enable him to officiate at *khwan* ceremonies. According to the folk religion of the Lao, *khwan* are the thirty-two spirits which reside within each human being and which combine to make up an individual's spiritual essence. It is believed that whenever one or more of the *khwan* wander away or are left behind, certain kinds of afflictions, both physical and mental, result. The purpose of the *soukhwan* ceremony is to call the errant *khwan* back and bind it to the body (Tambiah 1968:108). The requirements for achieving this level of expertise included a year studying at the home of an elderly relative who had invited the younger man to become his successor. Thus, at the age of fifty, the doctor was called upon to revive the oral recitation and literacy skills he had acquired some twenty-nine years before as a novice.

Tambiah suggests that this apprenticeship is typical of certain cycles of lifelong learning for Lao village men as it has existed for centuries, exclusive of secular education. The importance of this type of careful description is that it demonstrates ways in which villagers approached the acquisition of valued knowledge and skills: (1) that learning could occur at any time in one's life, and (2) that learning could occur in either highly structured, rule-based environments or in one-on-one apprenticeships with retiring elders. It is also important to note the Lao emphasis on oral-based experiential learning in both the *wat* and in apprenticeship arrangements. To learn how to chant, one chants. The meaning of the words or explanations of their origin, purpose, or effects was not stressed. Thus literacy, although highly valued in traditional Lao society, was a specialized skill used for somewhat esoteric purposes.

With the exception of the experts (the abbot and senior monks, *moh yaa*, and *moh phawn*), few people in a typical Lao village had any use for literacy at all. Farming and fishing skills, boat-building, hunting, sewing, weaving, and cooking were all learned by imitation and apprenticeship. Legends and stories were told informally, read aloud by learned monks, sung in verse by a talented *moh lam*, or ritually enacted at the numerous annual festivals.

Government Schooling

The French colonial government did not institute a large scale educational system in Laos until 1939 (Chagnon & Rumpf 1982: 164), partly the practice of importing French-educated Vietnamese to fill high level administrative positions obviated any need to provide French style education to the Lao. When a plan was finally implemented for a network of primary and secondary schools, it was limited mainly to primary population centers, and was soon neglected because of the major international disruptions caused by the onset of World War II. French efforts to establish a secular education system to educate the Lao were revitalized soon after the war, and the number of primary schools grew from around one hundred in 1940 to 550 by 1950 (Dommen 1985:157).

Secondary education remained in a state of benign neglect, however, with only four secondary schools established in the major towns by the late 1940's. The programs offered by these lycees were basically carbon copies of the French national curriculum, with its rigid examination system, keeping education at the secondary level well beyond the reach of village children whose French language skills could not compare with the children of French expatriates, Vietnamese officials, and the Lao elite.

Following the withdrawal of the French, American efforts to expand and modernize the secular school system were thwarted by the insistence of the French-speaking Lao elite on "clinging to French colonial vestiges for another twenty years" (Chagnon & Rumpf 1982:165), basically leaving the system unchanged and disconnected to the political and cultural realities of an independent Laos. French remained the primary language of instruction in the secondary schools, and the national literacy rate in Lao hovered at around 25%, with the average level of these literates equivalent to completion of a fourth grade education (as reported in Wilder 1972:89).

In areas under RLG control, resources for adult education remained solely the province of temple based educational systems, and much of the activity in the rural government schools duplicated that of the traditional temple schools. Adult literacy was a major goal in Pathet Lao-controlled territories (Chapelier 1970; Chagnon & Rumpf 1982), apparently incorporating aspects of traditional systems for to educate toward political, social and technical development. The "cave schools" in northern Laos, in which heroic teachers and learners studied by candlelight to the uninterrupted din of the bombing runs outside, are now legendary. As reported in Chagnon & Rumpf, people in Xieng Khouang recall their adult literacy classes in a bombed-out temple:

> This is not only our beloved *wat*...it's the place where many of us learned to read and write in the early 1960's.(1982:166)

After 1975, the LPDR placed a high priority on secular education, and purged the system of its colonial vestiges, focusing mainly on basic education in Lao at the primary levels in the rural areas. By 1982, according to LPDR official statistics, the literacy rate among adults had reached 80%, with 75% of children between the ages of 5 through 11 attending primary school (Chagnon & Rumpf 1982: 168). Although refugees who have lived under the LPDR comment that the quality of education has deteriorated under the new system, government efforts to support universal primary education appears to have been to many a popular and welcome innovation (Chagnon & Rumpf 1982:163).

Popular Communication Networks

Popular knowledge about the outside world was often carried from village to village by travelling balladeers during the dry season (LeBar 1960), who extemporaneously composed in a form of poetry known as *gawn*. Usually accompanied by a *khaen*, the tales sung by of these wandering performers combined local gossip, news, and entertainment with moral instruction.

It is not certain how long these performers have practised their art in the network of settlements along the Mekong, but written forms of *gawn* date back to the 17th century. In a reminiscence published in 1959, Thao Nouy Abhay reflects nostalgically on his early nonformal education:

> How could we ever forget those serene nights of our happy and free childhood, during which, in the moonlight or in the falling dew we learnt not only the charm of the poetry, its spirit and its rhythm, but also the lives of the Sage whose doctrine is enlightening our whole existence? (Abhay 1959:241)

The wandering bard's improvisations excelled in mixing "the modern with the ancient" (HRAF 149:162), thus interweaving the tales of the past with experiences of the present, the universal into the local.

From all accounts, it is reasonable to conclude that the balladeers, who preceded the more specialized and professional *moh lam,* were in fact primary transmitters of contemporary news and historical legends as well as preservers of language and culture. In other words, as singers of tales, they played a major role in informing and maintaining the collective consciousness of *muong lao*.

The French traveler d'Orleans observed *khaen* playing on a sojourn to Laos in 1891-92 as follows:

> In the square, a man is holding one of the Laotian bamboo instruments that resemble an organ; this one is two yards long, and the artist produces from it sweet solemn notes, which mingle with some faint songs. (HRAF 116:534)

Another European sojourner observed in 1901 that "songs and improvisations enjoy a great vogue in Laos, and are an obligatory feature of every feast and every ceremony." (HRAF 149:161). From these and other accounts, we know that *khaen* playing and *gawn* (sung poetry), which form the basis for the art of the modern *moh lam*, were ubiquitous among the lowland Lao village network long before the French arrived, and that they functioned both as news and educational media.

In 1960, the state of public information in Laos was assessed as "embryonic" and "primitive," (LeBar: 135) with only one radio broadcasting station and a smattering of news publications in French, Lao, Vietnamese, and English. The travelling balladeers, boatmen, and monks who carried the news by word of mouth passed on "highly personal" accounts of current events.

Throughout the period of conflict, both the U.S. and the Pathet Lao recognized the need for improved channels of mass media for propaganda purposes. To this end, the educational branch of the Pathet Lao initiated literacy campaigns and "awakening groups," at which the new way of life under socialism was explained. The engagement of *moh lam* singers and troupes for these purposes will be discussed in the next chapter. In addition, the Royal Lao Government, under the direction of USAID and USIS, tried various other means of spreading its anti-Communist development message. However, it was acknowledged that the restricted uses of literacy and the lack of modern communications networks would seriously impede its delivery:

> Given the conditions that restrict the effectiveness of conventional media - the high rate of illiteracy and the scarcity of radio receivers and motion-picture equipment - government agencies have had to make use of picture pamphlets and leaflets. For example, photographs of the king and paper flags are distributed to familiarize the people with their sovereign and their national symbol, and poster-style leaflets have been used to attack Pathet Lao ideas and methods and to denounce control of rebel activities. (LeBar 1960:137)

Recognizing the limited effectiveness of mass media in the Lao environment, both sides experimented with using traditional media to get their respective messages across to a people who were basically disinterested in change. In the colonial period, this attitude had earned the Lao labels such as "indolent" and "passive." However, when viewed in deeper historical context relative to the concept of *muang lao*, it is clear that the Lao village was a self-sufficient yet loosely connected world in which systems for the transfer of knowledge and skills had been well established. While not impervious to the marvels produced by Western civilizations, the Lao were less than enthusiastic as participants in Western-style development schemes and economic reorganization plans in either of the models with which they were presented.

Tragically for the Lao, the emissaries of both of these models represented ominous, large-scale military machines which brought change in the form of upheaval, devastation, and hardship in place of the modernization and liberation they promised.

While capitulation to these external forces was necessary to survival on one level, is essential for the Lao in America to continue the process of reconstructing their sense of who they are by recovering the past, by revitalizing their spiritual traditions, and by asserting the features of their heritage which bind them together as sons and daughters of *muong lao*.

Notes

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[1] In his review of the 17th century travel account by Gerrit van Wusthoff, Paul Levy also notes evidence of the export of rhinoceros horn from Laos. Wustoff and his party left Vientiane with a cargo of benzoin, music, and stick-lac (the raw material for shellac), of which Laos (in 1959) "was still the world's chief producer." See Levy (1959), p.54.

[2] The "Indianization" process, according to Keyes, was made possible by the establishment of early trade connections between India and the ancient kingdoms of Southeast Asia. For a complete discussion of the spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, see Keyes (1977), pp.65-111.

[3] Along with the Buddhist flag and the recent RLG royalty, icons frequently on display at Buddhist temples in the U.S. invariably include statues of the Phra Bang, the standing Buddha presented as a gift to the Kingdom of Lan Xang, and That Luang, a 16th century stupa in Vieg Chan which has become a national symbol.

CHAPTER V

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF LAO FOLK OPERA

The emergence of folk drama in Southeast Asia was directly affected by the annual labor demands of the agricultural cycle (Brandon 1967), a point which leaves the question of whether such art forms can flourish in an industrial society open to the test of time. The preconditions for the development of such genre, according to Brandon, were created during the long period of migration of peoples from southwestern China into the river valleys of mainland Southeast Asia. These new immigrants, from whose cultures present-day rice growing practices and knowledge systems have evolved, established stable communities in which extended periods of leisure during the year allowed for the development of the arts.

According to Brandon, "leisure time is an essential precondition for the creation of theatre of any degree of sophistication" (1967:9), because both audiences and performers need significant amounts of time. Audiences need time to prepare for the celebrations during which performances occur and performers need time to rehearse and refine their performance skills.

As pointed out in the previous chapter, the cultivation of wet rice is labor intensive during the initial and early stages of growth, which coincide with the arrival of the rainy season in May and June. After the young shoots are transplanted (approximately six weeks after sowing), villagers are relatively free from intensive work in the fields (LeBar 1960:93) until the beginning of the dry season in October, when preparations for the harvest begin. Following the second labor intensive period of harvesting, threshing, winnowing, and storing of the rice, *lao loum* villagers enter a season of celebration and merit-making which continues until the next onset of the rains.

It is also during the last few months of the dry season when land travel is easily accomplished, that *moh lam* troupes are most active. For villagers, it is a time of celebration and relaxation after the busy harvest and the end of the Buddhist Lent (*vassa*). These periods are occupied by somewhat less demanding tasks, such as tool and fishing net repair, that allow more flexiblity in terms of time and energy. Thus the alternate periods of heavy productive labor and lighter maintenance activities in rural Laos have allowed for the development of a form of folk medium which requires extensive training and practice, and has provided an audience receptive to lengthy performances.

Traditional Forms

According to musicologist Terry Miller (1985), *lam* is basically defined "a story according to the rule of verse" (1985:23). It differs from song *(lawng)* in that the melody, accompanied by the *khaen*, is adjusted to fit the word groupings and meanings. The primary poetic form *(gawn)* is comprised of four line stanzas with seven syllables per line which obey certain tonal patterns, and which often feature both alliteration and interior rhyme (Miller 1985:12).

Over the years of its development, *lam* has been heavily influenced by Buddhism, both thematically and by the tradition of reading aloud certain of the palm leaf manuscripts which have been recorded and preserved in temple libraries (Tambiah 1968; Miller 1985). As part of the traditional educational practices that accompany the annual celebrations, these stories are intoned (*an nagsyy*) by monks or lay elders in a rhythmic style using a scale pattern which also occurs in certain forms of *lam* (Miller, 1985: 27).[1]

The styles of *lam* currently performed in Laos, northeastern Thailand, and in refugee Lao communities have undoubtedly developed in both style and content from the art of the early itinerant poet-minstrels as well as from the ritual performances and spontaneous improvisations of nonprofessional village artists. Among classifications of these earlier genre according to form and function, as opposed to region, are *lam puen*, *lam gawn, lam khuu* (courting lam), and *lam phi faa* (ritual *lam)*. The modern theatrical form of *lam* (*lam luang*) produced by the Providence troupe, as well as by present-day professional troupes in Laos and Thailand, is an eclectic composite that incorporates basic elements of the traditional forms into performances recast to fit the entertainment expectations of its modern audiences.

Lam Puen

The form of *lam* most closely related to the impromptu performances of the traditional poet-minstrels is that of *lam puen,* in which a single *moh lam* renders a tale based on an event in history in a manner closely related to the chanting of the Buddhist texts (*ann nangsyy*), skillfully interweaving references to current events and local gossip. After extensive interviews with *moh lam* in Northeastern Thailand, Miller (1985) disputes the claim by Brandon and other Western writers that modern singers of *lam puen* are skilled improvisers in the Homeric tradition (1985:40), but concedes that they are able to adapt performances to fit the occasion. *Lam puen* appears to be a dying art in Northeastern Thailand, with only seven singers able to demonstrate it in 1974, and an unknown number of *moh lam puen* still active in Laos.

Lam Gawn

The word *gawn* refers not only to poetry in general, but to the particular form of versification, tonal patterns, and rhythmic structure of a particular poetic form.[2] There are, in turn, multiple subcategories of *gawn*, depending mainly on the occasion for which it is composed or performed. The specific performance style associated with *lam gawn* is typified by the participation of two skilled singers, usually a man and a woman engaged in alternate story telling and occasional dialogue. Among the varieties of *lam gawn* (literally "sung poetry") identified by Miller are *gawn lam* *lah* (poems to bid farewell), *gawn nitaan* (excerpts from stories), *gawn sasana* (poems concerning religion and the life of the Buddha), and *gawn lawn kong* (poems based on imaginary boat trips on the Mekong River) (Miller 1985).

In one type of *lam gawn* performance described by Miller (1985:45), the two singers engaged in solving a "problem" such as a riddle or questions "concerning religion, literature, goegraphy, history, and other aspects of Lao culture" (1985:12). Each singer built up a vast repertoire of clever, entertaining, and informative answers, and performances were staged in a format not unlike a modern quiz show, in which an individual moh lam ran the risk of becoming so "disgraced as to have to leave the stage" (1985:12).

Other forms of village *lam* appear not to have been the sole province of skilled professionals or semi-professionals, but were rather more spontaneous events in which all could participate regardless of their level of skill, such as the "love courts" described below. Yet others, such as the *lam pee fah* appear to have been central to religious ceremonies and healing rites.

Love Courts

The content and style of periodic villagecourting rituals have contributed heavily to modern theatrical versions of *lam*, The events, in which the whole village would participate, were typically arranged in conjunction with festivals following the harvest, and were essentially designed to provide the opportunity for young men and women to select marriage partners by testing each others' wit and skill at improvisational *lam*.

The following observation of preparations for this "particularly original fete" in the market town of Pak Lay was recorded in 1894 by the French traveler d'Orleans:

> Upon a small terrace in front of our verandah sit a dozen young girls, their busts draped in gold-thread scarves of native make. Opposite them a dozen young men take their places. A man carrying a Laotian organ, which he has difficulty in setting up follows them. The pipes of the organ are so long - nearly 14 feet - that he is finally obliged to cut a hole in the roof, but the damage can be easily repaired. We are about to assist at a good game of repartee, between the men and the women, in a sort of literary joust.(HRAF 10:370)

Another Western observer (Lewis 1950) described the sound of these communal courtships as "bee-hive dronings" (HRAF 69:T-5) which continue long into the night, presided over by a Buddhist monk situated in a wicker cage, which "symbolized the protection of the religion from these earthly distractions."

In D'Orleans' account, another of the typical features of *lam*, the stylized dance movements and gestures which accompany certain parts of the performance are described:

> When the woman rejects her questioner's propositions, the latter takes two small candles, and of little wax coiled round few threads, holds them fixed with the thumb nail, and gesticulates, turning his hands and moving his arms in passes like those of a hypnotiser. (HRAF 10:370)

This ritual was the "accepted preliminary for consummation of affairs of the heart" (Lewis 1950, HRAF 69:T-5), and instances when suitors were competing, contests were arranged in which the young woman could "test under competetive conditions the poetic and musical capabilities of each of them,"

There is no reason to believe that the love courts, like the improvisational performances of the itinerant balladeers, had not existed for centuries before the French arrived, although without documentation their precise history will never be known. However, their widespread popularity within living memory of the Lao clearly indicates the fusion of poetry, melody, and dance in a nonprofessional performing context, suggesting that villagers have not only observed and listened, but actively participated in improvisational *lam*.

Lam Phii Fah

This form of *lam*, which has only rarely been observed by outsiders, constitutes an exorcism rite, which may well predate the arrival and spread of popular Buddhism. Practitioners *(moh lam phii fah)* were among several part-time ritualists in Lao village society who specialized in mollifying the malevolent spirits inhabiting the villagers' world. *Phii fah* is the name of a powerful "sky spirit" who, when called upon by the singer, can intercede and overpower bodily illness in the form of an invading evil spirit. In the *lam phii fah* ceremonies described by Miller's informants in Roi-Et province of Northeastern Thailand, the ritualists are generally older women who qualify for the role by virtue of having undergone the exorcism themselves at some earlier stage in life.

In the contemporary Lao-Thai village world described by Miller, a *lam pii fah* ceremony is only called for when a victim cannot be cured by a folk doctor or a by modern medicine. If the cause of affliction is determined to be a spirit, the next step is to determine which one the person has offended:

> *Pii* causes illness for many reasons. *Pii hai-pii nah* (field spirits) may do so because their path is blocked by a paddy dike; other spirits may desire that a spirit house be build for them, feel neglected, offended, or merely capricious. The spirits of ancestors may cause troubles because there is tension within the family or village over unequal distribution of property or marital difficulties. Eventually the root causes must be eliminated as well as the spirits themselves appeased. (Miller 1985:66)

The type of malady for which the *moh lam phii fah* is consulted is one which produces relatively mild symptoms That is, the victim feels no pain and exhibits no obvious symptoms, but seems weak without cause.

The purpose of the ritual is entice one or more benevolent *phii fah* to enter the *moh lam's* body. The spirits are said to be seduced by the improvisational singing and dancing, accompanied by a single *khaen*. The singing style, in a ceremony observed directly by Miller, is sung slowly in short phrases, and may change as the *moh lam's* body is occupied by different spirits. Because these helpful spirits are said to go from place to place on a horse, the *khaen* player is referred to as a "skilled horseman" and when the music begins, it is said "the horse is running" (Miller 1985:68). If the ceremony is effective, a *phii fah* eventually enters the victim's body, calming the offended spirit and eventually causing it to leave, thus restoring afflicted person to health.

The traditional use of *lam* both in exorcism and courtship rituals suggests that the combined power of the poetry, the dance, and *khaen* music can influence the supernatural world as well as the natural one to bring about desired results. In contrast to distinctively Western healing practices, the strategy is one of recognizing and overcoming the cause or causes of the illness through negotiation, thus accommodating its continued existance at a safe distance.[3]

The absence of formal training or apprenticeship necessary to become a *moh lam phii fah* or to participate in the love courts indicates that the basic improvisational skill required for *lam* in at least some of its traditional village forms requires neither literacy nor formalized training. It is more likely that talent was nourished in the context of spontanous musical word play at a very young age and continued throughout life, and for some developed through more formalized tutorials into specialized forms of *lam*.

Modern Forms

According to Carol Compton (1979:95), there are four basic methods used by the Lao to classify *moh lam* performances in modern Laos, based on (1) geographic area, (2) subject matter, (3) number or performers, and (4) poetic form. Various other characteristics, such as degree of audience participation and type of instrumentation, are used by Compton as descriptors within these categories.

Recchi, whose earlier (1968) study of *moh lam* in Laos for USIS outlined its value as a propaganda medium, mentions subject matter, the number of performers, poetic form and the method of presentation as identifying characteristics. The type of *lam* used most often in the USIS-sponsored performances appears to have been *lam gawn*, described by its close association with the traditional poetic forms employed by village *moh lam*.

A distinguishing feature of all forms of *lam* is the extended preliminary utterance at the beginning of each performance, "*O, lanaaw............!*" (Harken!) while the *khaen* player tunes his instrument. Following this preface, which is made by each singer in the case of a duet or dramatic performance by several singers, there follows a self introduction, in which the singer may also address the occasion, remind the audience to uphold morality, and pay homage to the Buddha (Recchi 1968:3). This custom is illustrated in the opening verses of the *Lam Sithandone* recorded and translated by Compton:

Now I ask to pay respects
To Lord Buddha throughout the world

Who radiates supreme, precious knowledge
Which surrounds my head (1979:17)

For purposes of this study, the two most relevant characteristics of a performance are the subject matter and mode of presentation. Great variety has also developed within these categories, a fact which further demonstrates the adaptability and flexibility of the medium. In regard to the latter, the presentation format may be considered in terms of the number of singers, whether or not they assume dramatic roles, and their level of interaction with the audience.

At one end of the scale, one or two singers and a *khaen* player are contracted to perform in the home of a family sponsoring a *boun* (festival), to which neighbors and relatives are all invited. The *moh lam* sit or stand, simply dressed, on a mat with (at most) a kerosene lamp or single lightbulb to illuminate their faces. The performance is geared to the occasion, and audience members are directly addressed, even urged to participate. If a story is being related involving several characters, one singer may assume multiple roles. The repartee becomes more spontaneous and intimate with the flow of rice wine as the evening wears on, and generally lasts throughout the night.

At the other end of the spectrum, a temple association or government organization sponsors a *moh lam* troupe consisting of up to 20 professional singers to perform a specific script from its repertoire. This type of performance, known as *lam luang*, takes place on a raised wooden stage complete with bright lights, scenery, and amplification equipment. Each singer has a specific persona, and uses a combination of elaborate cosutuming and heavy makeup to help project the character. Singers can and do improvise, but much less frequently than in the more intimate home environment. With the larger audience separated by sound equipment and lights, there is little opportunity for direct interaction.

What appears to have occurred in the devolopment of modern forms of *lam*, especially in northeastern Thailand and to a lesser extent in Laos, is a process of commercialization which has resulted in the proliferation of the more theatrical *lam luang* troupes, resulting in diminishing quality. Laments Miller:

> The rule of thumb in rural Thailand is that the guadiest, most brightly lit, loudest, and slickest troupes attract the audiences and thus increase their fortunes.(1985:84)

In the days before generators, electric lights, and amplification systems, performances were more intimate. As remembered by older villagers in Miller's study, singers travelled by boat, oxcart or on foot and performed mainly at a home or temple. The performance took place on a straw mat, lit by a lantern fueled by a kind of tree sap (*gabawng*) hung on a bamboo pole. Payment could be made in the form of rice, services, or small coins tossed onto the mat and divided among the performers.

Major changes in performance structure over the last three decades include the construction of small wooden stages, the introduction of amplification systems, and the use of electric lights. All of these innovations have made the performances easier to see and hear, but have virtually eliminated the close rapport between performers and audience (Miller 1986:49).

Similarly, in the early days of community theatre in America, footlights were recognized as the barrier separating actors and audience into "two distinct and separate parts" (Burleigh, 1917: xix). The desire to restore the intimacy of the old days has not yet been voiced in Southeast Asia or in Lao communities in America, in contrast to improvisational and experimental theatre, which actively seeks a closer, more personal relationship between performers and audience. Conversely, the type of Westernization stylistically associated with rock performances and broadway musicals been the dominant external influence affecting modern *moh lam*.

In Northeastern Thailand, these trends are evidenced in singers sporting the latest American fashions and hair styles. In some troupes, even the *khaen* has been abandoned in favor of of electronic organs and guitars. Having avoided the cultural consequences of rapid modernization over the last two decades, it is likely that a wider variety of *lam* is still being performed in Laos today than in Thailand.

In terms of cultural transition, refugee communities in the United States have experienced changes that are considerably more catastrophic and profound than have the northeastern Lao-Thai. The question of whether modern versions of the more traditional forms will survive in all three contexts depends on the extent to which they can preserve artistic integrity yet adapt in ways that maintain audience interest and relevance.

Training and Apprenticeship

To become a professional *moh lam* in Laos today, a trainee must become proficient in the poetic forms, musical style, and dance techniques of *lam*. As *lam* has become more professionalized as a performing art, its practioners have increasingly used literacy as a tool for researching, composing, and preserving newly adapted or improvised versions. Although the audience need not be literate to understand the performances, literacy in Lao or Thai is a basic requirement for a young person who wishes to pursue *lam* as a career because they depend on texts a great deal to learn new material. In this way, Tambiah (1968) asserts, "the oral and written traditions are not separate but supplement each other" (1968:116).

Literacy as a requirement for *moh lam* appears to have taken on a more prominent role since the relatively recent availability of printed scripts from northeastern Thailand. As confirmed by Mr. Sui Seetawng, an elderly *moh lam* interviewed by Miller, learning techniques for trainees in 1918 were exclusively oral, even though the poetry ultimately came from a written source (1985:45). Mr. Sui reported that neither he nor his monk-tutor wrote out the poems but learned instead through oral repetition and guided practice.

As of the 1960's, opportunities to become literate in Laos were available mainly through the network of pagoda schools, secular elementary schools, or individual tutoring arrangments. Training opportunities for prospective *moh lam* were perhaps not not as well publicized as they were in northeastern Thailand, where professional associations were established as early as the 1930's to facilitate apprenticeships and act as booking agents for singers in search of work.

Having achieved functional literacy in Lao, trainees in the 1960's also had to learn the primary poetic forms and rules for versification. Miller (1985) notes that since children grow up hearing *moh lam*, they are already familiar with its cadences and subject matter, and many go to teachers only after acquiring the basic techniques from tutors within the village or family (1985:45). Most of the *moh lam* singers interviewed by Compton learned their first poetry from parents, relatives, or monks. During the early stages, the learner's main task was to memorize vast amounts of poetry to the teacher's satisfaction (Compton 1979:109), then gradually learn to elaborate and eventually to compose.

Apprenticeship in *lam* offered young women the opportunity to set up tutoring arrangements with monks in order to study the poetic forms. However, monks were restricted by the strict religious codes of the *sangha* from participation of any kind in music and dance. Therefore, an apprentice who learned poetry in the temple would be obliged to learn the singing and dancing techniques elsewhere, invariably under the guidance of an experienced or retired *moh lam*.

In the words of a monk-tutor interviewed by Compton at his temple on island in the Mekong:

> I have many students, but I only teach *lam* poetry to them. The students learn the *lam* performance themselves. Currently I have a number of students, one which I feel will soon be quite good. (Compton 1979:112)

Many of the male apprentices interviewed by Compton in Laos had also learned the basics of *lam* in the temple, either through informal tutoring arrangements or while spending time as temple boys, novices or monks, as in the following account given by a popular Lao *moh lam*:

> My father taught me my first poetry. I would try singing the verses with my friends....At that time, I was studying in the temple with about forty other boys. A monk in the temple saw that I was good, so he wrote more poetry for me...At first I memorized the poems written by the monks; later I was able to understand how to compose them myself. (Compton 1979:110)

In his study of literacy in the Thai-Lao village of Ban Phran Muan, Tambiah (1968) recorded another sequence of training as described by a 36-year old singer. Like all village children, this singer had undoubtedly become familiar with the musical and poetic patterns of lam simply by attending numerous performances and perhaps imitating, even improvising songs in play. After having completed four years of elementary school, this singer had been sent by her parents to Khon Kaen to study with an accomplished *moh lam* for a fee of 1200 baht. She lived in the teacher's house and studied with him for seven months, following a routine which combined mental, physical, and spiritual aspects of training in this way:

> In the daytime she copied verses and memorized them; in the evening and the night she practised singing and dancing with the teacher. When she had completed her studies, the teacher taught her certain magical verses which she must recite and the accompanying ritual which she must carry out before every performance she gave as a professional singer. (Tambiah 1968:116)

Most *moh lam* seem to have had their talent discovered and subsequently made a commitment to pursuing *lam* as a profession relatively early in life. However, the time it takes to become a performing artist varies widely. When asked about the length of the training period, *moh lam* interviewed by both Compton and Miller reported no specific period for study. Progress depends entirely on the skill and motivation of the trainee. The level of actual performance experience for apprentice *moh lam* also varies. In larger troupes, the less experienced members had an opportunity to gain experience in minor roles before graduating to more demanding ones. In other cases, singers completed their apprenticeships before appearing on stage. All of the singers interviewed by Compton reported, however, that it takes many years of intense training to become truly skilled. This was confirmed by members of the Providence troupe who, after several years of training and performing, do not consider themselves accomplished performers.

An accomplished *moh lam* is able not only to render stories and songs competently, but also to improvise in order to please a particular audience. Thus at a certain point in their training, apprentices had to "break free" from standard, memorized performances and begin to compose on their own (Compton 1979:113). Using this improvisational skill within the boundaries of the versification rules and general format, each performer achieved a certain license to embellish and even create new dialogue at each performance. The literacy component of training would continue to be useful as a means of exploring and selecting new scripts as well as a way of recording an individual's creative additions to existing texts (Tambiah 1968:116).

As a career, the life of a professional *moh lam* in Laos or northeastern Thailand offers an attractive alternative to subsistence farming for those who seek mobility and recognition. In recent years, as *lam* has grown increasingly commercial, troupes have become more competitive and hence more exclusive, making it more difficult for young villagers to break into and sustain. To simply take up the life of the wandering bard seems no longer possible. Still, there remain educational avenues for the young and talented to prepare for rewarding careers as popular educators themselves.

Furthermore, the life cycle of a successful *moh lam* does not necessarily end with retirement from the stage, but may continue with the training of new apprentices. Thus the choice of *lam* as a livelihood amounts to a lifelong commitment to learning - learning to imitate, create, and improvise in a way that both entertains and teaches, then passing on one's knowledge and skills to the next generation.

Educational Applications

Traditional forms of *lam* were clearly a popular medium for the transfer of many types and levels of knowledge among the rural Lao. While news, legend, and religious epics formed one type of thematic base, observable natural phenomena were the source of another. As educational mediators, *moh lam* were evidently responsive to the ages, interests and learning styles of their listeners.

Local Knowledge

An example of the playful transfer of complex scientific knowledge was witnessed by d'Orleans in 1891-92. On a river trip, the Frenchman quizzed his boatmen on astronomy, and found that "they know most of the constellations," although the names ascribed to them differed from their Greek counterparts. In a rare Western insight into the rural Lao view of the universe, d'Orleans reported:

> The Great Bear they call the Elephant. The 'bands of Orion' go by the name of the Bow, because of the two small stars at the side which suggest an arrow. Venus is the 'star not loved by pigs,' because, as they say, it is so bright that pigs do not eat when they see it. (HRAF, 10:366)

Faure (1959) reported the engagement of an expert *moh lam* during a privately sponsored *boun khoun khao* (harvest festival) to amuse and instruct parents while their offspring participated in the verbal dueling of the love court:

> ...the parents sit down in a circle round the singers and are soon caught in the spell of the conundrums they set each other and parry with some subtle answer. No problem is too intricate or too delicate for such a famous *moh lam* as Tiem-Pa, cleverer than any scholarly astronomer at explaining such phenomena as the eclipse, or the motion of the stars, or the creation of the world. Faure 1959:152)

A Broader View

In addition to naming and classifying features of the observable natural world, *lam* has traditionally been the medium through which historical and geographical information, as viewed from a somewhat broader perspective than that of the village experience, are transmitted, as in the "quiz show" format of *lam gawn*.

In Tambiah's ethnography, (1968:115) a *moh lam* troupe performing in both Lao and Lao-Thai villages in 1961 included in its repertoire a story based on the history of Vieng Chan and a performance documenting the orgins and migration of the

Thai peoples from southwestern China. In his description of one performance, Recchi (1968) observed a pair of singers engaged in a humorous verbal duel, the object of which was to show that the female *moh lam* was more knowledgeable of facts related to geography than was the male. This observation led Rechhi and others involved in pro-Western development and propaganda efforts to conclude that lam was the perfect medium for introducing new scientific knowledge and building national identity.

Folk Tales and *Jataka*

As *lam* evolved into more complex dramatic forms, professional *moh lam* troupes became more sophisticated but less spontaneous. Performances of the popular *gawn nitaan*, regional Lao folktales, concentrated on the clever exploits of princes with superhuman qualities, beautiful women, hermit-monks, giants, and the Hindu god *Pha In* (Indra). The theatrical forms of *moh lam* have, according to Miller,been heavily influenced by the non-musical Thai theater *(likeh)*. Their educational role, relative to the dramatization of *nitaan* and *Jataka* may be seen as one of popularizing traditional literature. As such, these theatrical genre may be considered a popular medium for the transmission of cultural values and norms.

The *Jataka* tales were related by the historic Buddha (543-423 B.C.) as a combination of sermonizing and guidance counseling, depending on the situation. Francis and Thomas

(1956) believe that each *Jataka* was revealed in relation to some problematic incident calling for a parable pointing to the solution or a change in behavior which would bring about better understanding. In each story, the Boddhisatva appears either as central protagonist or passive observer to reconstruct the tale for future audiences.

The *Jataka* are varied in theme and style. Some are directly moral, others are comical, and still others are satirical. The Boddhisatva most often appears in the tales as a semi-divine prince, a clever tradesperson, a wise hermit, or an animal with human, sometimes superhuman qualities. Each of the 557 tales contains a clear moral or lesson for life, and are often used as the scripts for sermons as well as *lam*. The last ten are *Jatataka* are considered the richest and are the most often depicted and retold in rural Southeast Asia (Wray et al 1972: 16).

In Lao culture, the *Jataka* form the base for popular story-telling, and are repeated frequently at annual festivals in a variety of forms. Temple walls are often painted with sequential scenes selected to remind viewers of story lines heard repeatedly since early childhood. *Jataka* are also related in connection with temple ceremonies in the form of sermons, chanted readings *(ann nangsyy)* by monks or elders and informally by story-tellers, parents, and *moh lam*. Traditionally performed by one or two singers using various regional styles, modern *moh lam* troupes have readily adapted *Jataka* tales to their more flamboyant theatrical style.

In contrast to the simpler style of earlier forms, the latter are often staged with elaborate costuming, make-up, and scenery. They are presented to large audiences on a raised platform, relying on ear-splitting amplification and bright stage lights to command attention at temple fairs.

Regardless of changes in format and appearance, however, the most widely performed *Jataka* tale remains *Vessantara*, the story of Prince Wetsandawn *(Pha Vet)*, the penultimate life of the Buddha. The telling of this tale, which is integral to the annual festival by the same name *boun Pha Vet*, contains clear and deeply respected lessons for life by presenting a model for charitable behavior through nonattachment to worldly possessions and relationships.

As the son of the god Indra's principal consort in her earthly incarnation *(Phusati)* and King Sanjaya of Sivi, the newborn Prince Vetsandawn (Vessantara) began his life by asking "Mother, what gift can I make?" (as quoted in Wray et al 1972:93). Throughout his youth, the prince continued to freely give away his possessions, including a magical white elephant to a neighboring kingdom in a prolonged period of drought. Forced into exile for this act, the prince, together with his wife and two young children, distribued the remainder of his possessions to the people and entered the forest to live as poor hermits. At the request of an indigent Brahmin who also inhabited the forest, Prince Vetsandawn painfully forfeited his two beloved children, then in a final act of selflessness, gave away his devoted wife.

With the help of the gods, the family was eventually reunited and Prince Vetsandawn invited back from exile by his adoring parents:

> So great was their joy at being reunited that all fell weeping on the ground in a faint. The gods took pity, the earth shook, lightening flashed in the clouds, and from the skies fell a shower of heavenly rain that revived the royal family. King Sanjaya asked Vessantara to return to rule the kingdom, for the people, regretting his departure, wished him to be their king once.more. Vessantara, having given all, was willing to resume his kingly role. He put away his hermit's robes. (Wray, et al 1972:101)

Thus at the end of the story, Prince Vetsandawn is rewarded for having willingly given his all, even his loved ones, to other humans in need. Although not requested to so by the gods, his generous actions are approved of and rewarded with "treasures sufficient for distribution until the end of his life." (1972:101) In the Lao cultural context, perpetuation of the high value placed on generosity, and the disdain for accumulation of individual wealth at the expense of the poor can be easily seen in this popular *Jataka*. The Buddhist connection between right action and just rewards is also emphasized in the portrayal of unlimited generosity as a key factor in the attainment of both worldly and heavenly bliss.

Through stories and legends, the *moh lam* transmitted moral lessons in a highly entertaining and captivating way, in many instances popularizing the same characters and themes expressed in the more somber sermons and readings presented by the monks. Interestingly enough, even though modern *moh lam* performances are often held on temple grounds, the monks are forbidden to watch, as some of the more earthy aspects of the performance may oppose the monks' ascetic way of life.

As Tambiah asserts (1968:115), it would be inaccurate to consider any form of *lam* purely secular. They not only "preserve and propagate regional traditons," but they are also channels through whom Buddhist stories and epics are passed on to villagers. The performers, thereore, must be well versed in the principles as well as the legends associated with Buddhism.

Lam and Politics

The exploitation of *lam* as a medium for political propaganda was precipitated by the 1932 coup d'etat in Thailand, after which elections for public office were "sporadically" (Miller 1985:55) held in northeastern Thailand. Candidates made it a practice to hire *moh lam* to aid in their campaigns, either to attract crowds before a candidate's speech or to incorporate material glorifying the candidate in their own performances. This practice, according to Miller, has flourished and remains popular in modern Thailand.

In both Thailand and Laos, *lam* has been used extensively both to advertise governmental policies and to promote development projects, including the construction of dams and bridges as well as the introduction of new farming methods and family planning techniques. During the period of massive U.S. military involvement in Laos (1960-1975) and Thailand , *moh lam* were actively engaged by both communists and capitalists to sing the praises of their patrons and denounce, often humorously, the evil intentions and bungling strategies of the other side.

On Contract to USIS

USIS operations in both Thailand and Laos recognized the adaptability of moh lam as an anti-Communist propaganda tool as early as the late 1950's, and launched several attempts to mold local permormers into advocates of the economic development projects sponsored by the Agency for International Development (USAID). These efforts met with varying degrees of success, as singers experimented with several ways and means of getting pro-government messages across.

In Laos, where efforts to use *moh lam* as a propaganda medium were more extensive, USIS sustained its practice of hiring and training *moh lam* troupes both for live performances and the making of films over a longer period of time (1957-1975).

Live Performances. The first reported performance of a live USIS-sponsored *moh lam* performance was given at a temple fair in Vieng Chan in 1957. Because "the message was subtle and did not refer directly to Communism" Brandon (1967: 300) the audience stayed. By the early 1960's, three *moh lam gawn* troupes, each consisting of two singers and a *khaen* player were under contract to the USIS in Vieng Chan. During the course of one year (1962-63), these three troupes gave at least six hundred performances, apparently surpassing the troupes in Thailand in subtlety and effectiveness. However, the troupes hired by USIS to perform in Laos actually originated in northeastern Thailand, because the Lao singers were "too difficult to locate, train, and hire." (Miller: 56)

A typical performance, as described by Brandon, reflects the observer's amusement at the troupe's skill in adapting traditional *lam* for propaganda purposes.

> A typical USIS *mohlam* performance is made up of half a dozen thirty-minute routines and lasts about three hours. Twenty minutes of each routine is standard *mohlam* fare, joyfully graphic accounts of lovemeaking and courtship. Ten minutes is propaganda "freight." Propaganda items are fashioned to suit the need, but any any time around ten are in the repertory. Five are basic items included in every performance and five are supplementary items used less often. (Brandon 1967:299-300)

The basic messages referred to in this description were designed to encourage people to: (1) enlist in self help well-digging, school-building, and similar projects; (2) support the Royal Lao government, (3) respect Buddhism, (4) appreciate American economic aid; and (5) identify with Lao national history. These messages were variations on three three basic themes:

1. Encourage consciousness of a Lao national identity capable of withstanding Communist blandishments

2. Tell the story of American economic help

3. Elicit support for practical, worthwhile community development projects.

(Brandon 1967: 300)

In a report intended as background material for USIS personnel working with moh lam in Laos, Recchi (1968) described the medium as by far the "most popular form of entertainment among the Lao" (1968:21). Different aspects of *moh lam* performances appeal to different members of the audience; for example, young men and women find pleasure in the joking and bawdy stories, while the very old as well as the very young enjoy the legends and popular tales . The skill of the performers as messengers, wrote Recchi, lies in their ability to adjust their themes and styles to suit a particular audience (1968:21). Therefore, "a straight narration telling why the farmer should increase his agricultural output....has low appeal" (1968:20). On the other hand, the same message skillfully interwoven with traditional themes and delivered in palatable format was considered far more effective.

In his account of USIS-sponsered *moh lam* performances in 1968, when the agency had six teams performing throughout Laos under contract, Recchi stressed the need to "solicit the people's interest through traditional songs and stories" (1968:20) before approaching the propaganda theme.selected for the performance. In one performance, the singers were able to incorporate the development message (double-cropping of rice) into the dramatic structure of the performance.

> He (the lead singer) mentioned the reasons why it was good to increase production...then, instead of stopping and going on to another subject, or joking and so forth, he made farming the subject of a verbal exchange with the women...The performers were able to carry the theme through three or four rounds and most of the people who had gathered remiined to hear it through. (1968:23)

Mr. Mohlam Films. Early USIS experiments using live *moh lam* for propaganda in Thailand failed because the troupes failed to use subtlety to deliver their messages, causing audiences to become bored and leave (Miller 1985:56). Live performances were subsequently de-emphasized and USIS began making *moh lam* films in the early 1960's. These films, which gained a good deal of popularity, were of four types:

1. documentaries about the Northeast with *moh lam* sound tracks
2. Central Thai documentaries with *moh lam* sound tracks
3. documentaries created and performed by *moh lam* troupes
4. straight *moh lam* performances featuring *moh lam gawn* singing propaganda texts.

(Miller 1985:56)

Of these, Miller reports that the most successful were the documentaries using *moh lam* sound track. There is no indication of how the success or failure of these films were measured other than that they were "well received" or "poorly received," as judged by whether or not audiences stayed or left. Such observations should be understood in the context of the outdoor village festival, where a film showing is one of many events competing for attention throughout the evening.

Films featuring *moh lam* were also produced by the motion picture section of USIS/Vientiane during the 1960's under the name "Freedom Films." Notable among these were the "Mr. Mohlam" and "Lao Drama" series, both of which used moh lam to propagate economic development messages.

In the first format, the lead singer in the persona of a feature news correspondent takes viewers on a guided tour of a specific development project or a problem which would make such a development project desirable. For example, in "Mr. Mohlam Visits the Flood," the singer proclaims:

> In this film I sing to you about some unforgettable episodes and highlights of the great flood as I saw it in Vieng Chan.
>
> I know many of you experienced and saw the results of the flood; some of you experienced a real drama of life and death - of suffering - and of fleeing from your beloved homes.
>
> (Recchi 1968:17)

In the "Lao Drama" series, themes identified by USIS were rendered in the form of playlets or short comedies. The example given in the Recchi report portrays an interaction between a village chief, a merchant, and the manager of a cooperative store. During the exchange, the merchant is convinced to cooperate with the store by establishing a mutually beneficial business relationship rather than ruin the store by underselling it. The problem is presented in a humorous way, leading the audience to laugh at the greedy, salacious merchant as well as to appreciate the good sense of economic cooperation between independent merchants and government sponsored cooperative stores.

In comparison to live performances, the *moh lam* films produced by USIS were at least as effective in terms of captivating and holding audiences, but were limited because of the difficulty of transporting and using projection equipment to remote villages outside the provincial capitals and market towns. The mobile live performance teams, consisting as they did of only three members, their costumes, and a *khene*, had the ability to reach more rural audiences. However, as reflected in the Recchi report, the particular troupes on contract to USIS were somewhat reluctant to do so:

> ...there are the hardships of spending nights in villages where food is both scarce and of poor quality and where sleeping quarters are whatever happens to be available in the village. "We often have it rough when we go to villages," said one to me. This undoubtedly must affect the quality of the performance. (Recchi 1968:24)

This attitude partially explains why the Royal Lao Government's propaganda efforts were ineffectual in the long run, despite the appropriateness of the chosen media strategies. The performances, films, and radio broadcasts sponsored by USIS were representatives of a small ruling class attempting to exploit a traditional medium to win over the allegiance of a much larger rural population whose self-sustaining village economies and local autonomy were only threatened by the prospect of massive change. Having identified with the ruling elite and having therefore adopted life styles and attitudes disparaging of village accommodation, it is no wonder that the propaganda messages they sang fell mostly on impassive ears.

Lao National Radio. Like the *moh lam* films and live performances sponsored by USIS, radio broadcasts using *moh lam* were considered an effective means for promoting economic development efforts and eliciting support for Royal Lao Government causes. In 1968, USIS was actively producing 10-14 minute audio tapes for distribution to Lao National Radio, USIS Branch Posts, Lao Army camps, and the Voice of America.

For these productions, themes generated by "local employees" of USIS were given to a moh lam, who would write the songs. The scripts were submitted for approval and given trial performances before being recorded and distributed.

By the mid 1960's, radio was beginning to compete with traditional carriers as a news medium ,with the number of receiving sets estimated at about 70,000 (Roberts 1967:196). The Lao National Radio network was in possession of a strong transmitter in Vieng Chan and was in competition with the more powerful Radio Hanoi. Reception was relatively good throughout southern and central Laos, but inconsistent in the northern provinces.

Most of the radio sets in Laos were owned by government officials, merchants, and village headmen. Therefore, the effectiveness of the medium in reaching ordinary villagers was severely limited. Beginning its broadcast day at 6:30, the LNR carried domestic and foreign news and commentary in Lao, with music and features later in the day. In 1966, the network carried an English language lesson as well as a program in the *hmong* language, designed to reach the *lao soung* of the mountaintops.

By the early 1970's *moh lam* performances on the LNR had become commonplace; singers were frequently commissioned indirectly by USIS and directed by station managers to render a predetermined political or development message into song. Such performances, like those directly recorded by USIS, were rarely spontaneous and required approval prior to broadcast. As one singer interviewed by Compton reported:

> When I *lam* for the radio station, they give me the news, story, subject or a number of points which they want me to lam about, but I compose it. I read it (the points) over, and then I go to the station and it comes to me. (Compton 1979:116)

One well-known singer who delivered regular commentaries on the activities of the National Assembly reported that he needed to get approval only on "touchy subjects;" but felt free to choose his material otherwise (1979:116).

As in the case of the films, radio performances were drastically abbreviated and altered in format to suit a distant, general audience instead of an immediate, local one. The radio spots appear to have been in fact, short monologues on single themes rather than full length traditional performances. No estimates of their effectiveness during the

1960's and 70's were made, other than general comments about their popularity among listeners and the frequency of their employment. Whether such popularity arose from the entertainment value and skill of the singers or receptivity to the message was never officially determined. What is evident in retrospect, however, is that the exploitation of *lam* by the Pathet Lao found at least equally appreciative audiences.

Singing for the Pathet Lao

Although evidence is sketchy, *lam* was clearly one of many folk media used for popular education in territories controlled by the Pathet Lao during the period of conflict (1954-1975). In general, descriptions of folk singing and story-telling by the Pathet Lao and Viet Minh praise the appropriateness and effectiveness of these media in glowing, near-heroic terms. Although I could find no detailed accounts of revolutionary *moh lam* among the lowland Lao, the following description of the use of folk singing for propaganda purposes in the highlands of Luang Prabang Province may offer a parallel.

This account is from a *Neo Lao Hak Sat*[4] publication (1966) which relates the story of Su, a provincial cadre in charge of propaganda and agitation work. The account reflects the strategies promoted by PL cadres of using traditional media to implement a process of group conscientization:.

> She called on the village headman. While she sat by the fire nursing her baby and drying its diapers, the headman visited his fellow villagers and asked them to come...Su invited them in and talked to them about crop-raising and fabric weaving, and other familiar topics, without ever mentioning politics. Then she started singing a folk melody, softly at first. Her sweet voice gradually rose. More and more people came and sat around the fire. When the audience had grown big enough, Su begain singing a revolutionary song on an old folk tune. The song depicts the former peaceful life of the Lao people and how it has been disrupted by the imperialists, who sow discord among the nationalities. (Xuet 1966:30-31)

In their report on social changes after five years of Pathet Lao administration on the Plain of Jars, Chapelier and Van Maldergham describe the use of moh lam as members of village "awakening groups" (*khana pak louk*) whose mission was to widen political knowledge, encourage cooperation and collectivization, and motivate people to fight. (Chapelier 1970:20). The Recchi report confirms that "*moh lam* was a very common thing with the PL's" (1968:20), based on the anecdotal evidence provided by the Lao wife of an American USAID employee in Thakhek. She had, in fact, once been a student of a PL-sponsored professional, and attested to its wide popularity, both live and via radio broadcasts from Sam Neua province. As reported by the USAID employee:

> It seems that, as in mobile info team type mohlam "on this side," propaganda and fun are liberally mixed. The main theme of the mohlam I listened to on the radio the other day seemed to be a kind of fun-oriented anti-Americanism, if you can imagine such a thing. (Recchi 1968:20)

The PL-sponsored *moh lam* also reportedly used their skills to explain foreign terms and concepts such as "capitalism," "imperialism," and "exploitation." As with the educational goals of USIS-sponsored moh lam, the material presented by PL singers was undoubtedly interwoven with traditional stories and performance techniques to make it more palatable to village audiences.

A major difference between the USIS-sponsored troupes and their PL-sponsored counterparts may have been in the social class and references of the performers. While singers on contract to USIS were either from or had adopted the attitudes of the cities of northeastern Thailand and Laos, PL-sponsored singers were villagers themselves, whose home bases were the outlying districts that the USIS troupes disdained as hardship posts. Moreover, like all PL cadres, traveling singers for the communist movement in Laos were careful not to offend their hosts by displaying superior attitudes (Chapelier & Van Maldergham 1970). Thus the popular education arm of the Pathet Lao strove to endear itself to the people as a grassroots resistance movement bent in all-out struggle to preserve the integrity and autonomy of *muong Lao*.

Lam in a Refugee Community in America

Troupe Description

Four singers and a *khaen* player, the founding members of the Providence troupem first started to rehearse and perform together in 1987 under the name of *Moh Lam Luang*. As explained by lead singer Phinphone Ratsabout (Personal Interview June, 1992), none of the singers considered themselves accomplished or professional performers before they left Laos, and, with the exception of the married couple, had not met each other prior to their arrival in Providence. Each had developed their skill in *lam* while in the refugee camps, both to pass the time and to earn supplemental income. As a teenager, Mr. Ratsabout had apprenticed himself to a troupe in Ubon province and toured with them for several years before coming to America as a refugee. With the exception of the *khaen* player, the performers all still consider themselves somewhat less than accomplished compared to the professional troupes they worked with or observed in Laos and Thailand, and feel that they have not yet reached their full potential.

Mr. Thong Inthavongsa, the *khaen* player, speaks of his skill somewhat more confidently, having formally studied and taught *khaen* playing at the National Arts College in Vieng Chan (Personal Interview August, 1992) up until his migration in 1982. Currently a full time employee at an electronics assembly plant in Worcester, Massachusetts, Mr. Inthavongsa is also an original and indispensable member of the troupe.

For the first few years, the group performed mainly at weddings, private parties, and festivals, and was also commissioned by the Refugee Arts Group of Boston to stage an abbreviated performance of a Lao *nitaan* (folk tale) at the

Boston Children's Museum in 1989. The group began to expand as new members joined, some as relatively experienced singers and others as new apprentices. In the modern traditon of the theatrical *lam luang* troupes in northeastern Thailand, the group has embellished its musical performance style by the addition a fully amplified rock band, including keyboard, drums, lead and bass guitars. In 1990, the group formed a loose relationship with an experienced *moh lam* performer and script writer, Mr. Guay Saungun, who lives in souithern Vermont. Currently in his early 70's, Mr. Saungun's ambition is to teach "everything he knows to the troupe before he dies" (Ratsbout Personal Interview June, 1992). Referring to this elder *moh lam* as their "master," the troupe dedicates a *wai khruu* (respect to the teacher) ceremony to him as part of each pre-performance ritual, in which the blessings of the Buddha are also invoked and "magic water" is consumed to ensure vocal endurance and vitality throughout the length of the performance.

Reflecting on his own migration and adaptation experience, lead singer Phinphone recalls that his parents, with whom he still resides, at first attempted to restrict his weekend *lam* activities, fearing that it would interfere with his education in America. "They thought it would affect my ability to think - make me unable to learn in the American school.". He persisted, however, despite parental admonitions, and regained their approval as the troupe began to gain a substantial reputation within the community as well as a measure of notoriety from the outside. He now devotes most of his weekends either to performances or rehearsals, and stays up late during the week nights sewing costumes and memorizing scripts.

Two of the lead singers (the married couple) and the *khaen* player reside in Worcester, Massachusetts while the other two live in Providence. Other singers and band members are residents of Lowell, Massachusetts and Worcestor, as well as Providence. Rehearsals take place in a rented house on Regent Street in Providence, where most of the band's equipment is stored, and which is also the home of another of the lead singers. All of the troupe's members, including the lead singers, are employed in factory jobs in Providence, Worcester, and Lowell. Lead singer Phinpone is a full time floor supervisor at an electronics plant and a student at Providence Community College. Rehearsals take place exclusively on weekends, with the group usually gathering at at one of the troupe members' homes on a Saturday afternoon, then rehearsing late into the night, sleeping over, and beginning the following day.

Rehearsals

The rehearsals I observed took place in a large rented house on Regent Street in Providence which is also the residence of one of the band members. Drums and amplification equipment were set up in the basement, while the traditional *lam* activity took place simultaneously upstairs in the living room, accompanied only by Mr. Inthavongsa, the *khaen* player. The atmosphere was extremely relaxed, with a great deal of socializing, eating, and drinking throughout the rehearsal activity. As an observer, I was made to feel welcome and plied with food and drink, but refrained from making recordings or taking photographs for fear that it would intimidate the newer troupe members, who exhibited a great deal of hesitation and self doubt.

On each of these occasions, much time and effort was devoted to the encouragement of new troupe members by the more experienced singers. The two methods I observed during this training were (1) singing along with the novice several times until the younger performer felt confident to try a song or text alone, and (2) showing the novice a videotape recorded several years earlier, to show how "bad" the more experienced singer had been, gently encouraging the apprentice not to feel "shy," to go ahead and put more emotion and expressiveness into her trial performances.

The seemingly disparate activities were eventually brought together under the guidance of Mr. Sune Vilavong, the group's stage manager and one of the founding members, who arranged the sequence of musical interludes and dramatic scenes according to a hand-written master script. In the live performance context, these events are loosely woven together as a slowly unfolding *luang* (story) which generally goes on for at least five hours.

The singers explained to me that the performances in Southeast Asia would go on even longer, until the last members of the audience had grown weary or appeared bored. The American context, they explained, subjected them to stricter time constraints, forcing them to bring the *luang* to a conclusion within a five or six hour time frame. Similar to the rehearsal, however, *moh lam* event in live performance is not a single-focus event in which an audience dutifully sits and observes, is allowed a scheduled intermission, and is generally expected to react in chorus with either applause, laughter, or silence.

As I had observed on several occasions at temple festivals and village performances in northeastern Thailand, the audience role in the live *moh lam* performance in the United States placed few restrictions on audience behavior. While it is expected that the usual social rules for propriety and self-control remain in place, the live *moh lam* performance is a festive occasion at which audience members are expected to eat, drink, chat, and come and go as they wish. In home performances in Laos and in privately sponsored entertainments in America, sponsors are expected to join in either verbally or by dancing with each other or, on occasion, with the performers.

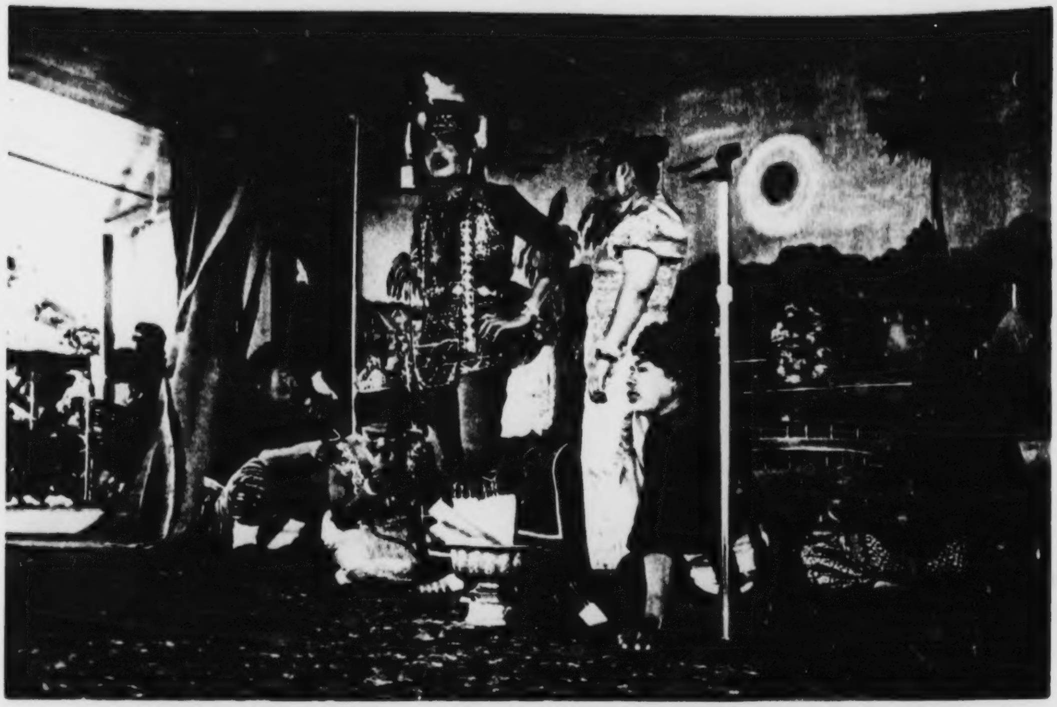
Live Performance Contexts

The most frequent performance venue used by the Providence troupe since its expansion and inclusion of the rock music band is a large, rented community hall. Examples are the Lithuanian-American Club on Smith Street, where Lao community religious festivals are held, or the Portuguese-American Club in Woonsocket. One such performance advertised throughout the Providence community took place in the Polish-American Citizens Club in Southbridge, Massachusetts. This six-hour performance, billed in both English and Lao as a "fantastic party" given by a "hot new band," was not connected to a religious or seasonal festival, and had a set admission fee of $10 for adults and $5 for children. The de-emphasis of the *moh lam* genre in the advertising, as explained by lead singer Phinphone, was seen as a strategy to attract the younger generation as well as the elders, who would immediately recognize the nature of the performance from the picture on the poster displayed at Asian food stores throughout Providence, Hartford, and Lowell.

A second live performance context, which I was invited to oberve and videotape, was much closer to a typical *wat* festival performance in Thailand or Laos. This outdoor performance, which was the first of its kind for the troupe in the United States, took place on the grounds of Wat Lao Buddhavong near Manassas, Virgina, which is the headquarters of the North American Lao *sangha*. This performanced coincided with the feast of *bun khaw padap din*, during which participants concentrate on making merit (*het bun*) for the souls of the dead. The troupe, which did not charge a fee for this performance, agreed to offer its talent for the purpose of raising funds for the temple. The rural setting and the size of the grounds (about 70 acres) contributes to the feeling of a recreated Lao physical environment, as do the Lao food stalls, the brisk trade in Lao cloth, children's toys, and rice baskets. The ubiquitous presence of saffron-clad monks throughout the duration of the festival activities adds to the reconstruction of this corner of Laos in Virginia. Only the presence of certain items such as baby bottles, Levis, and Reebocks plus the sounds of English spoken by children and teenagers break the spell.

An elaborate wooden stage had been constructed complete with a spacious backstage area for performers to eat and rest. A mural of That Luang, the national symbol of Laos, was permanently affixed behind the area of the stage where the band worked, and a series of flats depicting a Lao village scene formed the backdrop for the main performance. Canvas awnings and folding metal chairs had been set up for the audience, each of whom paid a $5 entrance fee, and vendors sold noodles, egg rolls, roasted corn, and watermelon during the performance. Audience members were encouraged to contribute generously to the temple fund by purchasing bouquets, then dancing up to the stage and presenting them to the troupe.

Backstage, the atmosphere was disarmingly relaxed, with large trays of food and drink available, a separate changing area separated by a large curtain, and with the children of the performers laughing and playing. Mr. Vilavong and his



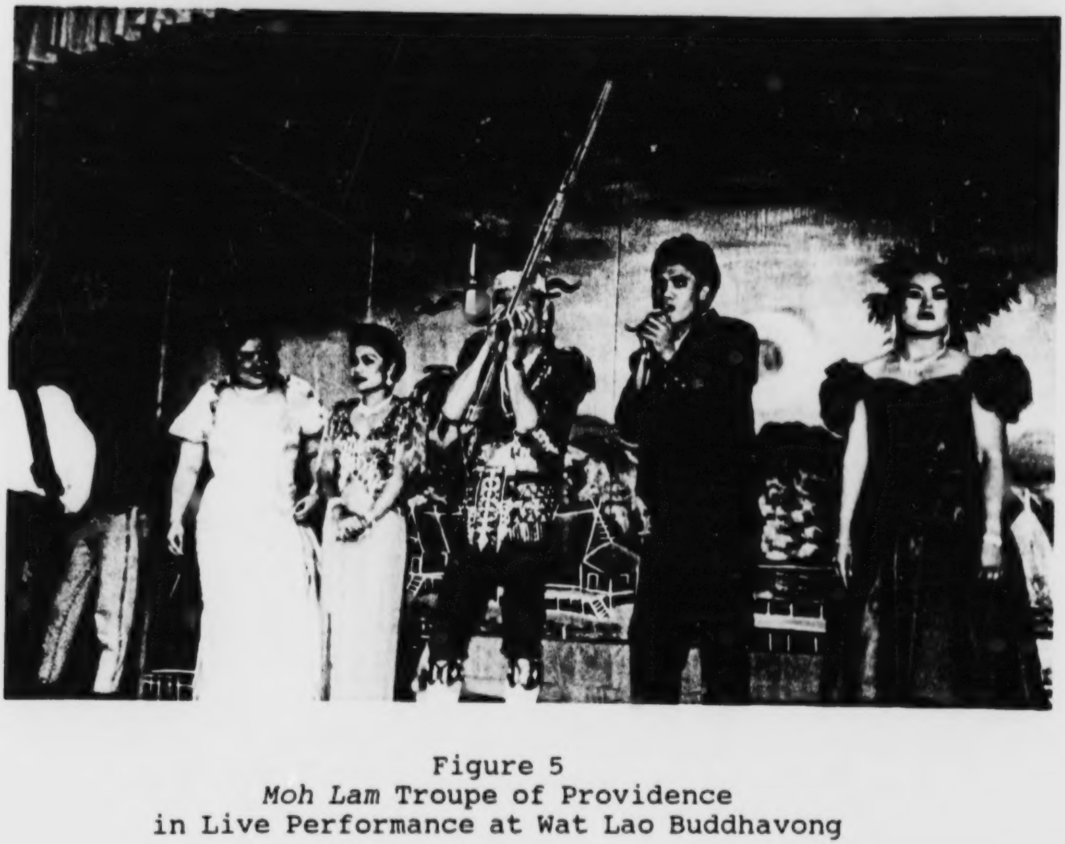


Figure 5
Moh Lam Troupe of Providence
in Live Performance at Wat Lao Buddhavong

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assistant stood next to the *khaen* player at the stage entrance, holding a script and informing the singers relaxing backstage when their entrances became imminent. The *khaen* player, who was hidden from view by the audience, figured prominently in that when the band died down, his amplified solos served to signal the continuation of the *luang*, which related the saga of a prince reborn as a frog.

Audience reactions to the outdoor performance at Wat Lao Buddhavong paralleled the patterns of attention and attendance in Southeast Asia. Audience participants in the dancing and flower presentation tended to be older adults, especially older women. Parents of young children remained seated only through the early hours of the performance as their children either watched intermittently or played.

Teenagers and young adults tended to stand on the periphery, laughing and chatting among themselves as the *luang*, regularly interrupted by rock music interludes, continued to unfold. Senior monks and nuns stayed away from the performance entirely, in strict accordance with the rules of conduct, while a few of the younger novices either took passing glances, or actually sat down to take in parts of the performance.

In return for their services (no fee was charged), the troupe was honored with an elaborate dinner and a special religious ceremony that evening, then invited to rest at the monks' quarters before making the return trip to Providence. Blankets and pillows were distributed, and while male and

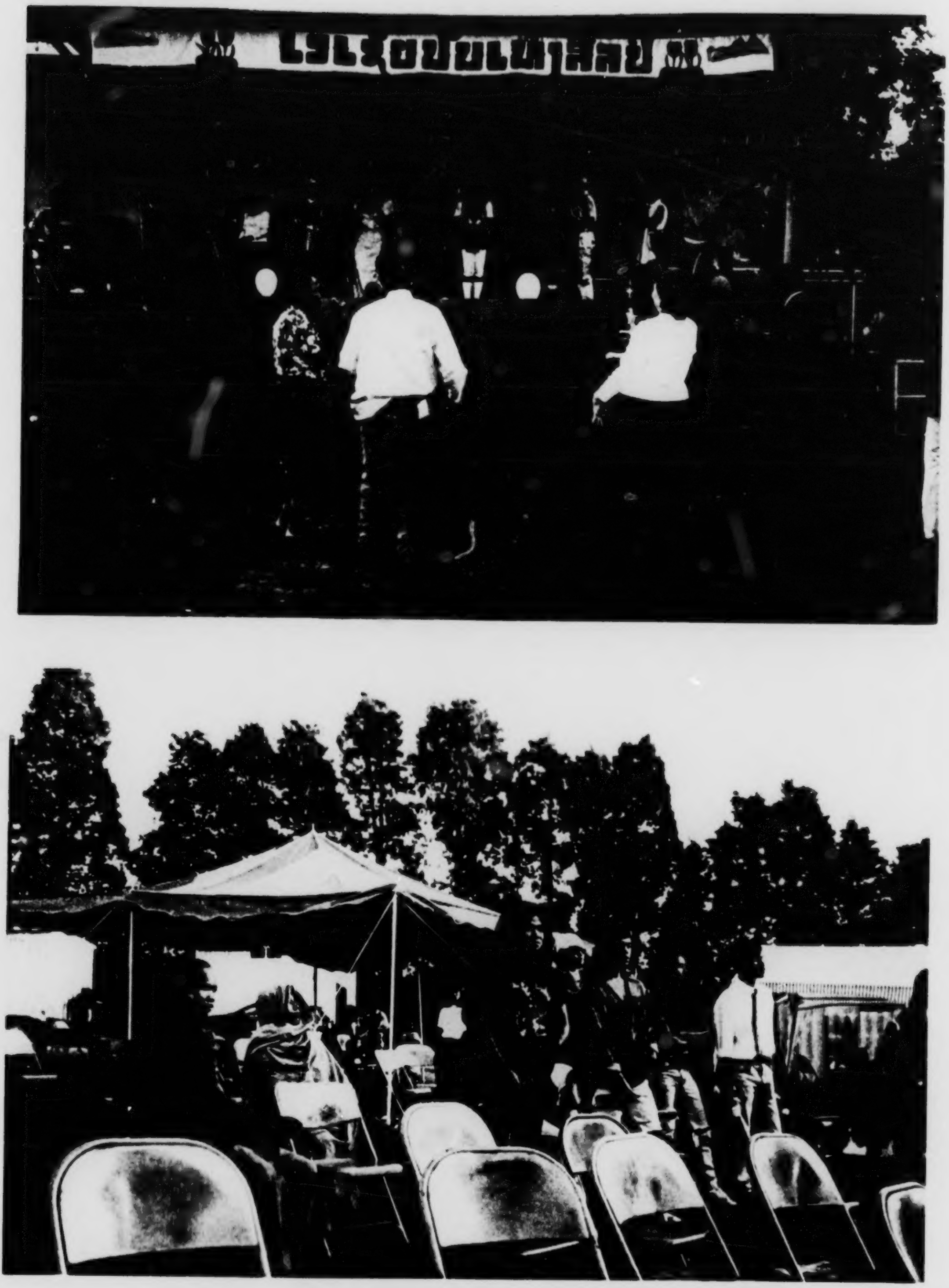

Figure 6
Audience Reactions to *Lam* Performance
at Wat Lao Buddhavong

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female performers, children, and friends lined up to rest on opposite sides of the room, the senior abbot calmly distributed mango slices and presided over a video projection of the afternoon's festivities.

Video Applications

Prior to my request for a studio performance, as described in Chapter 7, the main use of video by the troupe had been as a reflective tool to critique and improve on past performances. They had engaged local videographers to record their live performances, but had not been satisfied, either with the technical quality of the copies or with their own rendering enough to market them. The two major problems they cited with the tapes were that the sound was poor and the colors were not true. In the footage I was shown was of the Sturbridge performance, the amplification system had been balanced to allow the band to overpower the *lam*, causing the sound recorded via the in-camera microphone to garble the words and barely register the accompaniment by the *khaen*.

Nonetheless, tapes of this nature were deemed extremely important by the troupe as a major medium for improving their performances because "they are not surrounded by *lam* in America" (Ratsabout Personal Interview, June 1992) as they would be in Laos, and as they were in the northeastern Thai refugee camps. They also regularly watched imported videotapes of troupes in Laos and Thailand for the purpose of improving their own singing and dancing techniques as well as "getting new ideas for scenery and costumes" (Ratsabout Personal Interview June, 1992).

Role in the Community

When asked why they spent their weekends devoted to *lam*, each of the troupe members I spoke to expressed a common enthusiasm for *lam* as "fun," as something they enjoy doing more than anything else. Other sentiments expressed in answer to this question were that (1) it makes other people, especially old people, happy; (2) it helps younger people remember Laos; and (3) it gives them a chance to become skilled and recognized at something, a perception which suggests that they are generally not able to attain the same level of accomplishment in their jobs as they can in their avocation. The income generated by the troupe was not mentioned as a major motivation, but was freely discussed in response to my initial questions as well as during the negotiations for the studio performance of *Yaad Namtaa*. All decisions regarding financial matters, as I was to learn, are openly discussed and agreed upon by consensus with all members present before each performance. When asked if they aspire to become full time professional singers of *lam*, troupe members do not consider this as a real possiblity as yet, but hope to continue growing in skill and technique and reputation as they add a greater variety of stories to their present repertoire.

In the context of the Lao refugee communitee in America, the *moh lam* troupe of Providence is in the process of regrouping and recovering vitality as an artistic and educational medium. Like the Buddhist *sangha*, the Lao singers and dancers of tales have had to adjust to challenges, both personal and professional, that have placed serious practical limitations on their artistic development and diminished the central role they would have occupied in the Lao village network. However, the fact of their continuing survival and growth in the new context of urban America is both part of and vital to the the restructuring of group identity as perceived by a new generation of Lao-Americans.

Notes

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[1] Miller (1985:27) emphasizes that from a musical point of view, the connection between *an nansyy* and *lam* "cannot be over emphasized" because of their use of common tonal scales and rhythmic patterns.

[2] Each phrase of a *gawn* stanza must obey a preset pattern of tonal signs, and display certain features of alliteration and interior rhyme. These rules are summarized by Thao Nhouy, "Versification," in Kingdom of Laos (Saigon: France-Asie, 1959), pp.345-358.

[3] See also Chapter 18, "Exorcism as a Healing Ritual" in S.J. Tambiah, Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp.312-326.

[4] As the political wing of the Pathet Lao, the NLHS was responsible for popular education, and published numerous books and pamphlets recounting the heroic deeds of the Lao resistance.

CHAPTER VI

FROM PADDIES TO PARKING LOTS

The adaptation process of a people from rural Southeast Asia to post-industrial urban America, even without the physical and emotional damage resulting from the war and the refugee experience, would be fraught with difficulties. It is hard to imagine two more different worlds than that of the Lao rice farmer and that of the New England factory worker except that for both, economic survival requires persistence, hard physical labor, community support, and individual ingenuity. In specific reference to lowland Lao refugee experience in America, Muecke (1987) comments:

> In addition to the war, dislocation, and chaos that they experienced in Laos, these people have as a group experienced one of the most radical and swift shifts of cultural context in history. In the short span of a few years, they have migrated out from the self-subsistent unmechanized village life of rural Laos into the service- and cash-dependent life of the low-income housing sectors of American cities. In addition to the hardships of everyday life, they have been dealing, at varying levels of consciousness, with the problem of meaning, of who they are...(1987:277)

The extent of the contrasts between these two worlds is often underestimated or ignored, resulting in resettlement policies and educational programs that fail to address the longer term issues of cultural adaptation and accommodation.

The difficulties faced by newcomers from rural Southeast Asia with a recent history of violent upheaval and, in most cases, a host of unrealistic expectations, has been described as a "culture crash."

> The leap in consciousness required of immigrants from pre-industrial backgrounds is probably greater than that of any group in history. Loss of community and self-esteem, challenges to belief systems, and generational conflicts lead to what one professional calls 'a monumental amount of stressors.' (Krich 1989:24-25)

Because of their unique cultures, languages, and histories, each group of Southeast Asian immigrants has fared somewhat differently in their struggle to survive and flourish in America. The two stages of adaptation, described in detail below as (1) transition and (2) restructuring, are played out differently in each case. Ironically, it is during the much longer and more difficult second stage that funding for education and social services vanishes, leaving the more subtle problems of long term adjustment to fester until they reach crisis proportions.

As in the case of the other Southeast Asian refugees, the majority of lowland Lao who fled their homeland after 1975 perceive their migration as forced,[1] and remain generally dismayed over the circumstances leading to the exodus. Based on several studies of acculturative stress levels among refugees, immigrants, and indigenous peoples, J.W. Berry (1976) proposed that stress levels are highest when the cultural distance is greatest and the migration is involuntary (1976:35). Other factors which directly affect stress levels are the degree of multiculturalism describing the host society (from multicultural to unicultural) and retention of native language skills (Berry 1976:35). The case of the Lao in America, and more specifically of the Lao-American community in Providence described in this chapter offers is but one example of how these stress factors are played out several years after the initial migration.

Prior to 1975, there were only a handful of Lao university students and government officials who had set foot in the United States. Many more of the tiny elite class had opted to complete their higher education in France, and had maintained close ties to French language and culture. Knowledge of North America was limited to the information dispensed by the USIS in the form of pamphlets, radio shows, films, and teaching materials. English as a foreign language instruction was not part of the government school curriculum, and was offered to adults by the Lao American Association only in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. A few others had acquired basic communication skills in English and some knowledge of America and Americans through their work with American development agencies or the military.

Since the demise of the Royal Lao Government of 1975, approximately 290,000 refugees have crossed the border into Thailand. Many of the early escapees had been attached to former government as soldiers or civil servants, and fled soon after the takeover in fear of a bloodbath. Although the new government officially stressed re-education rather than punishment of former military and civilian employees of the Royal Lao Government, these measures were perceived as more of a threat than an attempt at reconciliation. These fears were confirmed as tales of brainwashing, starvation, and torture in the infamous "seminars" began to spread among the general populace.

Moreover, the abrupt withdrawal of foreign economic aid in 1975, together with the destruction of large areas of agricultural productivity and the existence of some 600,000 refugees in the Vientiane area, contributed to the virtual collapse of the national economy (Chanda 1982:116). The ensuing crisis and the relatively harsh measures taken by the new government to address the situation resulted in economic hardships and political repression which spurred the continuing exodus. Shortly after the arrival of the first groups of lowland Lao escapees, the ethnic background, formal educational levels, and social class of the camp population showed markedly different characteristics. During the peak years of migration (1978-1982), arrivals in the Thai border camps were either members of ethnic minority groups (Hmong, Mien, and Yao), or mainly rural lowland Lao (*lao loum*). Most of those who were accepted for resettlement in the United States arrived between 1981 and 1987.

By 1991, approximately 217,000 people with origins in Laos[2] had been admitted to the United States as permanent residents. Of these immigrants, 62% were lowland Lao (Lao Mission Report 1990). Allowing for natural population growth, a conservative estimate of the number of people who share lowland Lao language and culture now living in the United States lies between 125,000 and 130.000. In spite of their predominantly rural background, most of the Lao were resettled in medium to large urban centers where sponsors and jobs could be found. Like the other Southeast Asian refugee groups, they tended to form enclaves in apartment complexes and low-rent neighborhoods where they have been able to maintain communities with close social, economic, and cultural support systems.

Transition

In her description of the collective experience of Cambodian refugees in New York over a four-year period, Ellen Bruno (1984) observed that the first stages of resettlement may in fact be easier to cope with than the long-term separation from one's home culture. This is not to say, however, that these first few months of transition are easy. Refugees must learn how to cope with the physical aspects of their new environment such as weather and food, then begin to acquire the skills to negotiate cultural parameters of their survival.

Virtually all refugees have "first encounter with America" stories to tell, many of which are amusing on reflection - stories of wearing rubber sandals out into the snow and marvelling at the mysteries of an American supermarket. The re-telling of such stories can be therapeutic in that the humorous recasting of these narratives are part of a "bridging process" that reminds the tellers of how far they have come in coping with the physical aspects of their new lives.

As described in Bruno's study and confirmed by numerous first hand accounts by Lao refugees, the obstacles refugees must face during the first few months, although staggering, occupy an important mental space which counters the inevitable homesickness and depression. There is simply no time:

> For virtually all refugees, the first step off of the plane is their first experience with cold weather...before arrival, cold weather was an abstract concept from cultural orientation class. There is considerable adjustment to be made to the physical surrounding as well...Apartment living is new...Electricity, plumbing, flush toilets and refrigerators are initially perplexing. (Bruno 1984:13)

The functional survival skills newcomers must learn, such as dealing with the currency, getting around, buying food, using the telephone, and so on are more manageable than the complex long term tasks of achieving higher levels of communicative competence in English, achieving economic self-sufficiency, and parenting children in a strange new environment.

For some refugees, especially those who have suffered torture, extreme physical duress, or prolonged periods of waiting in camps (up to five years for Lao refugees in Providence), the initial stage of resettlement is also one relief that the long period of uncertainty is over. This may, however, have the effect of delaying the "psychological entry" (Berry 1986) of the refugee for several months after arrival.

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, there was generally ample help available to help newcomers solve the initial problems of food and shelter. Immigrants who arrived well after the first communities had established themselves benefitted from the additional advantage of knowledgeable community networks and support systems. Providence community members reported that during the early eighties, when most of the Lao refugees arrived, all were "taken care of," (Group Discussion #2, August 1992), whether or not they were relatives.

As early as 1982, however, government funding for programs created to help ease the transition process were already beginning to dry up. The Refugee Act of 1980 was designed to meet the needs of incoming refugees and "establish support systems for complete cultural integration" (Proudfoot 1990: xiii). This legislation provided for up to three years of basic economic subsidy, intensive ESL classes, and vocational training. However, a reassessment of the 1980 Refugee Act by the Reagan Administration signalled the beginning of a series of cutbacks in these support systems, and stressed instead rapid assimilation into the work force.

Therefore, the package of government programs intended to serve longer-term educational and social service needs was short-lived, leaving ESL teachers and social workers to the primary task of crisis management during transitional stage. Manuals and lessons produced during this period are crash courses on "survival skills" rather than complete language acquisition programs. As a result, most of the older Southeast Asian refugees who arrived in the early eighties (the peak years of Lao arrivals), have had very limited opportunities to acquire the English skills necessary to get and retain other than dead end jobs.

For many Southeast Asian refugees, the major turning point of the transitional "culture crash" is the tough realization that life in America is not what most refugees had expected. As Bruno points out, the only personal experience many refugees have had with Americans up to the point of departure is with workers in the Thai refugee camps, who tend to be "white, middle class, and extremely sympathetic" (1984:13), and are confused by the resentement of working class Anglo-Americans as well as other immigrant and minority groups competing for social services. While newly arrived refugees may not understand the roots of this resentment, they are quick to sense the hostility and, as survivors, often react by distancing themselves from other racial and ethnic minorities.

Another factor which causes both initial and prolonged dismay in Southeast Asian refugee communities is conflict between the self-definition of each distinct cultural group and the tendency of both officialdom and the population at large to lump the groups together as "Asian minorities." Skinner and Hendricks define the critical feature of ethnic identification of new immigrants lies in development of distinctiveness "as a separate category of people...and the accordance of this status by others" (Skinner & Hendricks 1979:25).

Unlike voluntary immigrants, refugees do not generally arrive with the preparation or resources to assert their ethnicity. The pattern of response to acculturation, defined as the process of change resulting from cultural contact (Berry 1986:26) is therefore less controlled.[3] The group's perception of itself as a community emerges more gradually from the patterns of interaction between their common experience and the larger social, physical, and economic context (Skinner & Hendricks 1979:25). Because the resettlement process of the Southeast Asians has been more closely managed than previous groups of refugees and immigrants, it is possible that their external definition, the way they are perceived as an American minority group, has pre-empted the reconstruction of a self-definition in what may turn out to be a detrimental way:

> The refugees' experience during the past four years reveals how outsiders, specifically educational and other institutions of the dominant society, are shaping the definition of a people's ethnic self-identity. This is an ongoing process which is occurring in advance of the Indochinese having defined for themselves how they wish to articulate with the dominant society. (Skinner & Hendricks 1979:25)

For the Lao, long term restructuring of group ethnicity depends at least partly on whether America can be perceived of as a place where it is still possible to be Lao. During the transition stage, when physical survival was at stake, this question had been of minor importance. Assumptions were made about the nature of American society that were based more in myth than in reality, and often perpetuated by refugees' experience in the camps. However, the perplexity and confusion that has developed over the desire to build a future as Americans while retaining certain elements of being Lao is an indicator that America is perceived as less than receptive, and indeed often hostile, to such a concept.

The initial method devised by some Lao refugees for coping with the stress of the culture crash, especially in the transition years, was to "become American" by converting to Protestant Christianity, eating hamburgers, and generally rejecting their Lao heritage. In extreme cases, those who were traumatized by painful memories of the past felt it necessary to break off with it entirely:

> Why do you ask of us? We know nothing...the American people do not need to know about Lao...it is a sad story...for me to tell would be bad for a new person here...what good to it? The Americans would think us bad...it is all dead...this is a new life...let's talk about other things here in America...that is more interesting for me. (Proudfoot 1990:79)

Case studies (Sen 1987; Muecke 1987; Proudfoot 1990) of communities in Illinois, Washington, and Oregon, together with a documentary film based on the experience of the Lao in Rockford, Illinois (Siegal 1987) reveal that the majority of the lowland Lao in these communities have struggled to reclaim, rather than abandon the past, and to seek out compromises that affirm both aspects of their existence. Sen describes this longer term process as one of persistence and accommodation. As will be seen, it has not been an altogether smooth transition, and has left certain issues unresolved for years, and perhaps generations, to come.

Restructuring: The Longer Term

In time, as the newcomers regain a margin of control over certain aspects of their lives, the more deeply rooted, internalized difficulties resulting from the trauma and upheaval rise to the surface more frequently. In the case of the Cambodian survivors of the Pol Pot era, Lao survivors of the bombardment of the Plain of Jars, and others who suffered directly from war-related violence, these difficulties are compounded by a "constellation of complaints known as post-traumatic stress disorder: recurrent nightmares, flashbacks, and distress associated with past events" (Krich 1989).

Typically, according to Boehnlein, this stage of the adaptation process begins around the end of the first year, when refugees turn into immigrants by having arrived at some type of settled life pattern and have begun to realize the permanence of their new situation. With this realization comes the observation that their children have begun a new, more thorough process of adaptation by learning to speak and behave like their American peers. Memories, customs, and values that dominated life at home begin to fade.

With their energies no longer devoted to solving the day-to-day problems of survival, there is more time for the parents and elders to contemplate long term consequences of resettlement in a strange new world. As Bruno describes the onset of this post-survival phase:

> Six months to a year after resettlement, when basic necessities are provided for and life assumes a recognizable rhythm, more profound and longer term problems begin to manifest themselves. (Bruno 1984:14).

These problems are compounded by uncertainty about how they, as refugees, fit into American society in general, and specifically about which aspects of their own heritage can or should be retained. As one refugee in Eugene, Oregon put it, "I am dead, and I am alive...those parts of me, Lao and American have a hard time living together" (Proudfoot 1990:61).

In Marjorie Muecke's case study of the Lao community in Seattle (1987), the cultural questions that must be examined over the longer term are: "Why are we refugees?" "Can we be Lao even in American cities?" and "Were we wrong for leaving our country and loved ones behind?" (Muecke 1987:274)

Muecke points out that there are remarkably few studies of how refugees cope with these cultural questions:

> Consequently, we know very little about how different groups of refugees resolve discontinuities in world views that they confront by resettling in a country of radically different cultural-historical heritage than their country of origin; about how they make sense of the chaos that they have experienced; or about how they explain their being refugees, about their suffering, to themselves and to their children. (Muecke 1987:274)

Although the refugees from Southeast Asia may bear some similarities to the many groups of immigrants who preceded them in the mills and sweatshops of American cities, it is their struggle with these long term issues of identity and guilt that distinguish their experience as victims of mass chaos and living reminders of an era other Americans would rather forget.[4]

This perception is partly revealed by the comment by a 69-year old man who has lived in Providence for 11 years: "Even though you become an American citizen, they still call you 'Lao.'" (Interview #6, July 1992) Thus the external perception of the Lao in America, in this man's view, has not changed, although his self-definition may have undergone restructuring.

The process of restructuring involves much more than simply building a new life in a new place based on a strong sense of identity and purpose. It also involves coping with loss, coming to terms with the past, and accommodating present realities. These directions often overlap, and do not necessarily progress as substages in linear fashion, but emerge as significant factors in the overall lifelong process of a community seeking to redefine itself in terms of its traumatic recent past, its current problems, and its future possibilities.

Coping with Loss

Many Lao refugees suffered the untimely death of at least one family member during the war years or soon thereafter. The Lao Mission Report (1990) lists a total of 4,708 people as killed or disabled as the result of the bombing of Xieng Khouang province. An unknown number disappeared indefinitely in the infamous government reeducation camps known as "seminars" shortly after the new regime took power.

For those lucky enough to arrive in America with nuclear family intact, there remains the longing for parents and extended family members left behind. In the closely knit village society of rural Laos, the sense of kinship among as well as within families was strong. The communal lifestyle called for close relationships among the *phii-nong* (older and younger siblings), the elders, the younger children, and the monks. Therefore, to lose one's home is not only to lose the land and the livelihood it provides, but also one's entire social context.

As Boehnlein points out, the long term grief felt by refugees is not for one, but for "a continuing series of losses: human, material and symbolic" (Boehnlein 1987:765). In addition to the mourning of the dead and the uncertainty about relatives still at a distance, refugees have lost their means of livelihood, their place or role in society, their homeland, and "many aspects of their rich and centuries-old cultural traditions" (1987:765), resulting a deep and debilitating sense of bereavement.

> Signs, symbols, stimuli no longer elicit familiar responses, and one's own behavior no longer is received by others as it was intended. The generalized, long-lasting sense of coherence and lawfulness in one's own world that culture provides has been devastatingly destroyed. Refugee suffering is thus not limited to the pain of losing family and country: it is deepened by awareness that former cultural solutions, the blueprints for action and interpretation of the world that is learned from childhood cannot be trusted. (Muecke 1987:275)

Boehnlein (1987) and Muecke (1987) both emphasize that the reality of this cultural loss among Southeast Asian refugees over the longer term causes a breakdown not only in perceptions of the new environment, but erosion of the culturally conditioned tools people use to make sense of their surrounding circumstances.

Coping with Guilt

For many Southeast Asian refugees, especially for victims of the secret war in Laos and of the Cambodian killing fields, there is also an element of guilt, not only in having survived, but in having left at all. In the Lao-American community, feelings of guilt are perhaps somewhat assuaged by the frequent re-telling and possible exaggeration of the conditions which led to their departure, as evidenced in the early scenes of *Yaad Namtaa Sao Lao Vieng* (see plot summary, Chapter 7).

Years after having made the first agonizing decision, faced with the choice of becoming an American citizen or remaining Cambodian, poet OK Kork is again plagued by a sense of uncertainty.

> Now I'm far away
> So confused
> About my future,
> About living in another country
> And becoming a new citizen
> To go through with it
> Would mean good-bye forever, (tr. Chigas 1991:31)

The need to re-examine motives, express doubts, and affirm past decisions is a necessary part of the self-definition process. In the re-structuring stage, the choice of language and form for such expression becomes a major consideration, since the maintenance of native language and the recovery of performing arts are integral to the establishment of an ethnic identity.

The Role of Endogenous Media

Returning to the general definition (Chapter 2) of media as "what transforms experience into knowledge," the implications for Lao folk opera in America are enormous. The singing of *lam* to the music of the *khaen,* together with the content of the stories and songs, are among the major keys to lowland Lao ethnic identity in Southeast Asia. These features, like the variety of rice consumed, the method of cultivation, the type of housing constructed, predate and supersede national boundaries. Like the characteristics of Lao language, in its many regional dialects, and the styles of dress and personal ornamentation, the artistic expression of *lam* may be considered an essential element of being Lao.

The themes of guilt, powerlessness, and loss pervade the story in *Yaad Namtaa*. For both main characters, the alternative to leaving is, at best, long term imprisonment, separation from family, and almost certain starvation. This portrayal of the circumstances forcing migration confirms the frequently stated reflection by Southeast Asian refugees that they had no choice but to leave. Staying meant submitting to a situation that was perceived as intolerable, whether it meant consisted of a death sentence, incarceration, or a life of extreme economic hardship.

In America, there is often little, in the eyes of the dominant society and its institutions, to distinguish the lowland Lao from other Southeast Asian refugees, or for that matter from immigrants with origins in such distant cultures as those of Korea, China, or Japan. In the process of restructuring and redefinition, the function of media in general and endogenous media in particular, is to help make such distinctions clear, and in so doing help preserve, restore, and revitalize the rich artistic and educational traditions as new members of the American cultural mosaic.

The Lao Community in Providence, Rhode Island

Of the 3,500 lowland Lao now living in the Providence area, approximately 50% are secondary migrants[5], having been attracted to the city by the plentiful supply of entry level jobs and by the emergence of a sizeable cultural enclave, complete with temple, a well established social service network, and a distribution system for sticky rice, baskets, cooking utensils, music, religious items, and cloth.

With a large lowland Lao population already established in Providence by the early eighties, as government support in the form of grant-supported services diminished, as networking within the community took an increasingly active role in the orientation and employment of newcomers. Concurrently, the role of government in the resettlement of refugees underwent a major revision at the national level, resulting in major cutbacks in programs designed not only to support refugees, but to facilitate their cultural adjustment.

The dilemma have having to survive in a society with values that appear to clash at nearly every turn with those of one's homeland presents itself as a subcategory to the second question suggested by Muecke as central to the restructuring of a Lao-American identity. That is, the question, "Can we be Lao even in American cities?" can be restated more specifically as "What must we abandon?" and "What can we retain?" To abandon everything, particularly the memories of the homeland and one's moral principles is, as reflected in *Yaad Namtaa*, self-destructive. Yet to refuse to learn how to get along in America, projected in the *Yaad Namtaa* by persevering at ESL classes, using food stamps, getting a job, and working hard, is to ignore the present reality. In developing a coping strategy, what seems to be suggested is a reincarnation of the age-old Middle Path.

One of the major drawing features of Providence for Southeast Asian refugees during the eighties was the abundance of industrial jobs for which for which communicative competence in English was not a basic requirement at the entry level. Employment in such jobs in the textile, metal parts, and jewelry industries depended rather on manual skills, diligence, and the willingness to perform repetitive tasks over long periods of time. The additional willingness to work weekends or night shifts, and to endure dismal working conditions without complaint made the refugees popular among employers, and networks for employing newcomers were established within the community.

Thus, throughout the eighties, there were plenty of jobs to be had in Providence, with its proliferation of light manufacturing companies specializing in textile mill products, metal products and services, electronics, and costume jewelry production.[6] According to the Southeast Asian Development Center in Providence, employment opportunities in Providence for limited English speaking workers have remained relatively good, but offer few avenues for advancement.

A City of Immigrants

The growth of a Lao-American enclave in Providence can also be partially attributed to the city's long, albeit often fractious history of accommodating newcomers of diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Beginning with the creation of an African-American labor force in the nineteenth century based on the 17th century slave population, and the subsequent migration of large numbers of economic immigrants, Providence has become a city of many languages and cultures.

Between 1880 and 1910, which were boom years for Providence cotton and worsted mills, machine shops, and jewelry factories, new arrivals actually doubled the city's population and changed its character forever (Smith 1985). It was during this period that large numbers of Italian and European Jewish immigrants established themselves in the city's neighborhoods. It was not long before they were joined by immigrants from Poland, Lithuanian, Armenia, and Syria.

> Soon the Yankee WASP residents of Rhode Island were a minority in the state - albeit a powerful minority that maintained economic control and continued to dominate political life through the first third of the twentieth century. In 1910, seven out of ten inhabitants of the state were immigrants and their children. (Smith 1985:11)

The combination of good prospects for economic survival and an already diverse population helped create the conditions that have helped make Providence a major center for later groups of immigrants, including Southeast Asian and Central American refugees. In terms of their motivation and ability to climb the economic and social ladder, the lowland Lao share ambition for themselves and their children, but have continued to experience the barriers of language, lack of formal education, and prejudice.

Although no formal studies on economic conditions of the Lao-American community in Providence are available, sources at the Southeast Asia Development Center and informal conversations with community leaders confirm that very few families in Providence, less than seven percent, own their own homes. Further conversations and interviews revealed that many lowland Lao refugees do not yet think of themselves as "Americans," nor do they perceive Providence as their permanent home (Phrommavanh Personal Interview: Aug. 7 1992).

The slashed budgets for refugee services in the early eighties meant that newcomers were given less time and fewer chances to learn English and adjust to the new environment before they had to become self-supporting. ESL programs were increasingly overcrowded and underfunded, with fewer options available. Classes or tutoring sessions had to be arranged around busy work schedules, and many programs had to rely on volunteers with minimal training as primary language teachers. The workplace literacy programs with ESL components instituted during this period focused on training employees in the minimum competencies deemed necessary to facilitate or improve job performance, with little attention to issues of cultural adjustment, fluency in English, or the restructuring of a new ethnic identity.

Current Concerns

The main sources of data contributing to the identification of current issues of concern to the Lao-American community in Providence were (1) interviews with community leaders (2) an informal group discussion with the family that was to become the video audience of the *moh lam* performance of *Yaad Namtaa*, and (3) in-depth individual interviews with seven adults, members and close friends of the family who had agreed to participate in the project. In addition, many informal discussions were held with individuals on various occasions, notably at temple gatherings, *moh lam* rehearsals, and at the Vientiane Market, a major shopping and video rental center. The main points at which these discussions converged in reference to Lao identity in America were invariably linked to the question of how to remain distinctly Lao, how to achieve higher levels of economic and personal autonomy, and how to bridge the ever-widening linguistic and cultural gap between parents and their children.

Community Leaders. As a first step toward laying the groundwork for the action research project involving the *moh lam* troupe of Providence, I contacted Mr. Thongsavanh Phongsavanh, the owner of the Vientiane Market on Silver Spring Street Lao food store who also manages a video production and distribution network, and who was known to the Refugee Arts Group in Boston. Mr. Phongsavanh was instrumental in arranging meetings and contacts with the Providence *sangha* and the *moh lam* troupe. He also put me in touch with Mr. Songprasit Phrommavanh of the Southeast Asia Development Council, who provided valuable information about the community in general and insights on the specific nature of the intergenerational conflict.

Ajaan Bounthanh Prasuet, abbot of Wat Lao Buddhavat, willingly discussed community problems and temple programs on several occasions, and has invited me to all subsequent religious festivals. These provided the context for further contacts and extemporaneous discussions, often led by Sr. Chankhom Luangloth, a Buddhist nun who has become more mentor than informant, and has freely shared her unique perspectives both on religion and community issues. A temple gathering also provided the occasion for meeting the family from Xieng Khouang, who agreed to participated in *moh lam* cycle of inquiry and reflection. All of those who became contacts, sources of informations, teachers, and friends throughout the course of the project were concerned with the loss of Lao culture and language through the assimilation process, and each was actively involved in some way in the preservation of Lao traditions in Rhode Island.

Mr. Phongsavanh's activities in this area include the publication of a Lao history book, the creation of a word processing program in several regional Lao scripts, and the distribution of traditional music and dance videos. He is also concerned with the creation of more varied and lucrative employment opportunities for Lao-Americans in Providence, and actively promotes the introduction of a Lao cultural component in the public school curriculum.

Mr. Phrommavanh's concerns revolve mainly around his work involving the inception and coordination of programs for at-risk youth at the Southeast Asian Economic Development Center. He cites the problem of growing gang membership in Providence as "out of control," in that so few of the crimes perpetrated by Lao gangs against Lao victims are reported, and the fact that recruitment by local gangs has expanded to include elementary school children.

For young men, Mr. Phrommavanh says that the gangs offer social and economic advantages that far exceed those available through the context of school or work, and cites the linguistic and cultural dysfunction between teenagers and their parents as the main source of the problem.

To intensify the marginalization of young people, Mr. Phrommavanh says that schools have not provided a context in which Lao students feel they belong. The bilingual aides hired by Providence schools have, for the most part, been mostly of Hmong origin who were able to work with both Lao- and Hmong-speaking children.[7] Moreover, the function of these aides was not to maintain native language and culture, but to translate directions and content of the mainstream curriculum. There are, at present, no state certified classroom teachers of Lao or Hmong origin in the Providence school system mainly, in Mr. Phrommavanh's view, because of discriminatory hiring policies that use culturally biased examinations as a pretext to exclude them. Thus Lao-American school children in Providence grow up with little external validation or formalized knowledge of their cultural heritage, contributing to the feeling of being "lost," and in need of a cohesive social context with which to identify.

Parents, especially those from rural backgrounds who have had little exposure to formal education themselves and whose communication skills in English are limited, continue to feel unable to cope with their children's behavior problems at school. Programs offered at SEADC seek to close this gap by facilitating communication between parents and school officials and by providing youth with social alternatives to gang membership. During the summer of 1992, a new program was initiated which also addressed the cultural heritage deficit by matching troubled teenagers with mentors, older college and university students, whose focus was to teach Lao language and culture while sharing a personal, elder sibling (*phii-nong*) relationship with their charges.

Cultural connections are also a major objective of the temple educational activities, although their focus is primarily religious. Ajaan Bounthanh repeatedly cited materialism and "forgetting about Buddhist principles" as the major source of problems in the Providence community. Each summer, male youth are invited to become novices in the Providence temple, thus subjecting themselves to the strict code of discipline of the *sangha*. During the summer, which comprises the equivalent of *vaksa* (the Buddhist Lent) in Laos, the novices learn basic chanting in Pali, the basic tenets of Buddhism (in Lao), and participate in community festivals.

The abbot also offers Lao literacy tutorials to "anyone who wants to study," (Personal Interview Ajaan Bounthanh: March, 1992) and holds informal lessons in Buddhist precepts with members of the laity. In many cases, individuals approach the monks with specific problems, often of a physical nature, to which they seek traditional solutions. Thus spiritual healing, traditional medicine, counseling, and teaching are thus often rolled into one session.

Conversations with Ajaan Bounthanh and with other monks and nuns at Wat Lao Buddhavat attest to the presence of malevolent spirits at work in the community. Having accompanied the refugees on their flight from Laos, these spirits are often considered the cause of otherwise unexplained maladies and accidents. Thus the formulas of the *moh phawn* and Buddhist monks are often in demand as agents of protection and cure.

Sr. Chankhom Luangloth described the major problems in the community as mainly spiritual, yet also cited the economic and temporal restraints of life in America as factors in refugee suffering. Based both on her own life and the lives of those she counsels, Sr. Changkhom's view is that parents are so busy making a living that have too little time to devote to the practice of religion or to disciplining their children. Teachers in American schools, she observed, are "too lenient...they spoil the children and turn them against their parents." (Personal Interview Sr. Changkhom: Feb. 16, 1992). Elder community members, herself included, still miss their homeland intensely and desire to return to die. Most experience daily anxiety over the relatives they left behind. However, Sr. Changkhom feels that for most elders, repatriation is now impossible because the younger generation is now firmly rooted in America.

In each of these interviews, the major issue that emerged concerns the difficulty of defining and maintaining a distinctly Lao identity while coping with physical and economic realities of life in Providence and, at the same time, coming to terms with changing family relationships. A second recurring theme in these interviews is the conflict between world views, not so much between the dominant society and the Lao-American community, but between the view of the world dominated by the past, and the one dominated by the present.

Since each of the community leaders interviewed deals with these issues in a professional capacity, their approach to solutions carries an aura of authority based on the overview they have gained through experience and status in the community. While these views are valuable, I also wanted to collect the views of community members who were more representative of the average refugee family, one whose senior members were of ordinary village origins, and who had not enjoyed the privilege of higher education. Many (but not all) of those considered community leaders in Providence had been either been members of the French-speaking elite, or had been involved with American military or development efforts, and had thus been among the first groups of refugees to be resettled. They are used to being approached for their views on the Lao refugee experience, which is more often than not considered representative.

For the purposes of this project, it was necessary to involve community members who are rarely asked by outsiders to relate their experiences or articulate their views. On several occasions, these sources commented on their own lack of authority and knowledge, asking me why I did not ask more highly educated individuals than themselves if I wanted to learn more about community issues. My standard reply was that I had already talked to community leaders, but also wanted to get the point of view of ordinary people. The response in each case was a guarded but willing "OK."

Family Gathering. Participants in the initial family discussion are originally from Xieng Khouang province, and describe themselves as prosperous farmers before the escalation of the war. None of them had traveled beyond the provincial capital, and had studied neither French nor English. Both parents had studied in government schools and were literate in central Lao. The father had also been a monk and was able to read and write *tham*, the language of the *dhamma* in which Buddhist religious texts were preserved. For this family, the idea of becoming detached from the land they farmed, from which they received sustenance and whose spirits they both honored and feared, would have been inconceivable if circumstances had not forced them to migrate. However, when the area became an uninhabitable high technology battlefield, the family was left with the choice of survival through migration to a government controlled area, or through collaboration with the Pathet Lao.

Having made the choice to leave Xieng Khouang with their young children, the Providence family lived from 1969 to 1978 near Vientiane, unable to return or to acquire new land. When the opportunity to escape arose, they crossed the Mekong, only to spend an additional five years in three border camps before being accepted for migration to the United States. These years of uncertainty and dependency, according to the parents, had the effect of making them feel like permanent refugees, distrustful of making too much of an emotional or material investment in their current situation: "Once you settle in a place, you may have to leave" (Family Discussion: May 15, 1992). After ten years in Providence, the parents still do not feel a sense of permanence, and still fear that some catastrophic event may force them to move again.

Family members also brought up their frustration at feeling "trapped" - a concept which restricts their movement in both physical and socioeconomic terms. The causes for this condition, as seen by the parents, are mainly their lack of ability to communicate in English and the necessity of having to work long hours in factories in order to support the family. Although the parents describe their jobs as "dirty" and "tedious," they are also pleased to have achieved economic self-sufficiency and claim not to have any complaints about their employers or supervisors. They do not, at this stage in their lives, foresee any real improvement in their employment potential, and instead place their hopes in the next generation.

The parents, who remember Xieng Khouang well, attempt to keep Lao traditions alive within the family by describing their home village, by insisting on Lao as the main language of communication in the house, and by attending religious ceremonies and donating both time and money to the temple.

According to their grown children, the parents have not described the destruction of their home village, or related other war experience, in an effort to spare their children painful memories. Instead, they describe the village as it was before the war, particularly in terms of the cycle of Buddhist festivals and ceremonies. Rented or borrowed videotapes made in Thailand or Laos, and current Lao publications often form the basis for family discussions of this nature. When asked if the family enjoyed watching videotaped *moh lam* performances, they replied that only the older generation, particularly the mother and her sister, had any interest in such things. However, when the son reminded his father that he had, in his youth, participated in the love courts and told the children that he had courted his mother in verse, the older man agreed with a smile that he had once known how to *lam*, but had forgotten.

Regarding life in America, the parents describe themselves as economically better off here, yet not as happy as they were in Laos, partly because of the "trapped" feeling mentioned above, and partly because of longing for their own elders and "way of life." In a whimsical comment, the father noted, "Now I have lived here and have seen everything, I would like to go the Soviet Union to see how thing are there." As the family's main decision-maker at the time of both migrations, he feels that the family was at the mercy of forces over which they had no control. After ten years in Providence, he still feels that he has little control over the major forces that determine the family's future, yet feels that they are "better off" than many of their neighbors because their children are succeeding in attaining their educational goals.

The children, currently in their twenties, are fluent in English but are less certain than their parents about their cultural identity. At 28, their unmarried daughter feels "more Lao than American," mainly because she does not feel accepted as an American at school or at work. Their son, who attends a midwestern university, feels more American than Lao in most circumstances, yet is actively searching for a definition of "what it means to be Lao." He feels less able to express himself in Lao than he would like to, and is missing the "background references" when he listens to older peoples' conversations in Lao.

Both grown children still feel restricted to living in large urban settings where there are Southeast Asian enclaves. On the occasions they have traveled into rural areas of New England, they have felt "weird" because of the perception that people were staring at them. Neither has a close friend who is not of Lao origin, and both are intensely concerned with what they consider the major problem in the Providence community - the alienation of youth and gang violence. By "youth," they refer to an age cohort several years younger than themselves who have few, if any, memories of Laos. Although there are no family members currently in this age range, both grown children are actively involved in mentoring relationships with Lao-American children between the ages of 11 and 15.

The younger family members attribute their own stability to their parents' efforts to keep them aware of their own language, history, and culture. Their father, explains the young man, had been a monk; therefore, he knew the principles of educating children. While he "kept a close eye on them," and occasionally used a stick to punish them, "he always explained why he was doing it." Thus the children gained a healthy respect for parental authority, yet did not feel abused or alienated from them. Like their parents, these young adults are keenly aware of the conflicts between what is seen as the materialism and absence of sexual restraint in American society with the Lao Buddhist code of modesty and ethical behavior. However, they also describe older people in the community as "rigid," (Telephone Interview: August 15, 1992) in their refusal to see their children's points of view and their reluctance to communicate openly with teachers, school administrators, and other potential collaborators.

Regarding *moh lam*, the grown children had some "pleasant memories" of watching outdoor performances in Laos and in the Thai refugee camps. However, since coming to America, they rarely watch the videotapes of *lam* made in Thailand and Laos, mainly because the tapes are of such poor quality and the stories are "not very interesting." The daughter, who teaches Lao dance to younger girls in the community, prefers to watch tapes of classical Lao dance, and the son expressed a preference for historical documentaries about Laos.

In-Depth Interviews. Of the seven adults interviewed individually, all except one had village origins. The smallest home village consisted of twenty households, and the largest, two hundred households. Six of the seven had been subsistence farmers at some point in their lives, and three had been in the military. Their formal schooling ranged from four years to ten years, and only one had any exposure to English before leaving Laos. Interestingly, this learning experience had taken place in a temple school, facilitated by monks who had studied in India. Those who had fought with the Royal Lao Army had spent from six to thirteen years in one of the re-education camps before escaping from Laos.

Each of the respondents described their primary occupations as workers in plastics, metals, and jewelry factories, and none felt that they needed English to perform their jobs. All except one held factory jobs in Providence at the time of the interviews (June, 1992).

Ranging in age from 30 to 69, all except the most recent arrival had received some ESL training. However, as shown in Figure 7, the length of the language training experienced by these seven adults tended to diminish with the progression of time, consistent with the decline in government support over this period. Of the seven, only one has made an effort to continue learning at home with the help of family members, yet all expressed a desire to continue learning English if the lessons could be designed to fit their busy schedules.

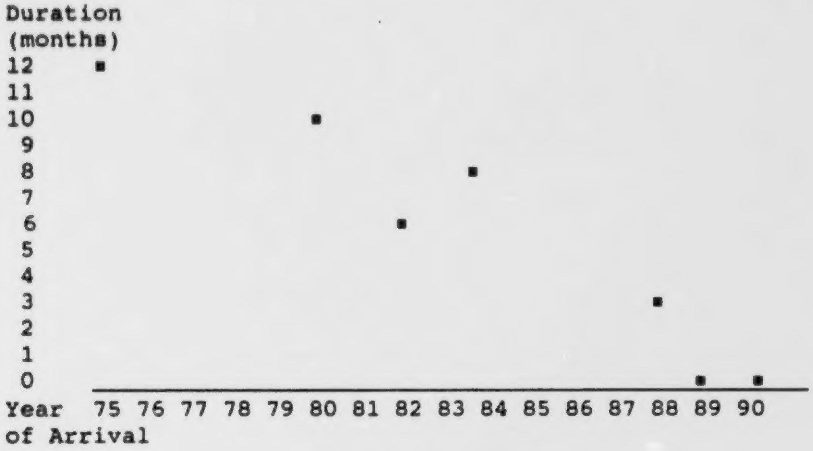

Figure 7
Duration of ESL Training Relative to
Date of Arrival of
Seven Adult Refugees 1975-1990

In the blunt words of the 1990 arrival, "They don't give us a chance to learn English. They just tell us to go work." However, with the exception of the most recent (1990 arrival), all of the respondents perceived their economic situation as "better," compared to their lives in Laos.

None of the respondents reported that they had been able to transfer their village farming, fishing, or carpentry, skills to their jobs in Providence, although all maintain small garden plots during the summer and enjoy fishing both for recreation and to supplement the family diet. One continues his practice as a *moh phawn,* presiding at weddings and performing *bacii* ceremonies and individual healing sessions on a fee-for-service basis. Such intra-community services, including the small-scale production of food and clothing items as well as the fees charged for live music and *moh lam* performances, account for a significant amount of supplemental income.

In all of the Providence interviews, a strong desire to preserve and revitalize language and culture, especially in context of Lao Buddhism, was often expressed. For some, the sense of loss is felt to actually strengthen their resolve to maintain language facility and cultural systems to the point of significant personal sacrifice. Consequently, the donation of time, money, and services to the Buddhist temple and the cultural activities of community-based organizations is felt by other community members to be extravagant.

"It's all we have left" was often part of the response to questions about the importance of remaining Lao in America. Specifics about how to go about defining and maintaining this identity as Lao included speaking Lao at home, hiring more Lao teachers in the Providence schools, encouraging teenagers to become novices during their summer vacations, holding classes in Lao history, religion, and culture at the temple, and tutoring in the specialized skills of music and dance.

The seven adults interviewed did not consider their relationship with non-Lao Americans problematic, yet did not maintain close social ties. The frequent response of "*boh mii banhaa*" (no problems), which suggests a "live and let live" kind of relationship.

The main differences between Lao and Anglo-American culture were perceived to be in the area of family and interpersonal relationships Dominant culture Americans are seen by the Lao as caring little about each other, as disrespectful to their elders, and blatantly promiscuous.

Several of the men interviewed in Providence expressed frustration at not being able to transfer their their farming, fishing, construction, and manual arts skills to gain economic independence in the new environment. One explained that in the subsistence village economy, people had multiple skills. If a family wanted to build a new house, the whole village would get together to help them. "In your own country, you know how to get along. .if you are hungry, you can go to the river and fish...in America, you have to get a license. The law is on top of your head. (Interview 1a: June, 1992). This and other legal restrictions imposed on what is seen as natural and ordinary activities has contributed to the sense of restriction and loss of freedom experienced by the Lao in America.

Living by the traditional, pre-revolutionary cultural system that is embodied in the concept of *watanatham lao*, meant existing in carefully structured, harmonious relationships both with nature and society. It meant always having someone to depend upon. The Lao word *asai*, meaning literally "to live" includes the concept of surviving, of having the basic necessities taken care of. Thus the lead female character (Viengkham) in *Yaad Namtaa* periodically laments, "I have no one to depend on," and in so doing invokes the common fear that to be alone in the world, especially in a strange place, no familiar *asai* systems, is a real and terrifying possibility.

Another source of anxiety, especially for the men interviewed, lies in the fear of layoffs, and the consequences that the loss of their jobs would have for the family. In Laos, reported one, "most people have their own homes. In America, if you have a job you feel much better...if you don't, you will worry about it because you may not have enough to pay the rent" (Interview 1a: June, 1992). There is no way to store up reserves for the future, no insurance against economic calamity other than the long term investment in children's education. However, if the children abandon their filial duty as the result of their cultural assimilation, the ultimate fear of becoming abandoned may well be justified.

Summary of Community Issues

After a decade or more in their new environment, having achieved a certain measure of economic stability and community networking, the ethos governing the lives of many Lao-Americans remains one of confusion and separation. Adults who had not achieved at least a secondary level of education and did not have extensive contact with Americans in Laos have generally not succeeded in learning English beyond the elementary level in Providence, which in turn limits their earning potential and inhibits social exchange. Although neither English nor literacy are prerequisites to employment in the factories and service industries of Providence, the income potential of such jobs is marginal, and in most families the employment of all adults in the household is necessary to the meeting of expenses.

However, the fundamental adaptation issues in the Lao-American community in Providence, as perceived by three groups of first generation immigrants, do not concern income or physical environment as central concerns. Neither are they closely related to concerns about racial or ethnic discrimination, with the discrimination as described by community leaders and related as experiences by individuals outside the context of the interviews. Rather, the prioritizing of these issues must be considered in terms of the ambiguities of the Lao refugee experience, a consideration which places the concerns and experiences of the pre-migration past on an equal footing with the problems of the present.

Of primary concern in each line of inquiry was the major question of how to define being Lao in America, and how to activate and maintain that sense of identity among increasingly errant youth.

Other areas of concern are all seen as related in one way or another to the loss of Laos , the Lao "way of life," and the application of Lao strategies for problem solving. For example, in the discussion of physical illness, the point was made that diseases such as breast cancer and heart ailments "did not exist in Laos" (Sr. Chankhom Personal Interview). Therefore the Lao had not yet developed medicines or formulas for their cure, leaving them powerless and dependent on expensive Western medicine.

Table 4
Summary of Community Issues

Community Leaders	Family Gathering	In-Depth Interviews
Lao gangs - "out of control" youth	Inability to communicate with members of dominant culture	Loss of Lao language and culture
Misunderstanding of Lao in America	Loss of Lao language and culture	Memories of upheaval/war/re-education camps
Lack of discipline in schools	Feeling "trapped"	Loss of economic autonomy
Absence of Lao-American teachers	Memories of upheaval/war	Lack of job stability
Breakdown in communication between institutions/Lao community	Inadequate bilingual programs/materials	Missing home/relatives /Lao way of life
Missing home/ relatives/Lao way of life	Confusion about American "system"	Changing family roles
High cost of living in America	Breakdown in communication between children and parents	Implications of "becoming American"
Memories of upheaval/war-related stress	Demanding work schedules	Demanding work schedules
Physical illness	Poor working conditions	Oppressiveness of legal system

Unforeseen problems, especially the loss of Lao language and values among children born in America, have replaced the original personal crises associated with economic survival and the initial stages of culture shock. Fear of rejection and isolation accompany these concerns, especially in terms of the way American society is perceived by the Lao. In this view, the same process of Americanization which facilitates economic success and social adaptation may ultimately lead to breakdown in traditional family relationships. Older community members feel caught between the desire to return home and their obligations to family members in America.

In terms of economic and family stability, much hope is placed in the education of children, for whom opportunities that would have been undreamed of in Laos exist in the United States. Yet the inability of parents to communicate with their Americanized children and to maintain the modes of discipline that characterize Lao culture calls for a reconstruction of this vision in recognition of present day realities, limitations, and potentials.

Notes

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[1] On the basis of their own perceptions, the majority of the Lao interviewed in Providence (May-July 1992) felt that they "had not choice" but to leave. The portrayal of circumstances that created these conditions is dramatized as a major theme in *Yaad Namtaa* (see Chapter 7 of this dissertation).

[2] According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (1991), the exact number of Lao refugees from 1975 to 1991 totalled 287,409, of whom 216,984 had been accepted for resettlement in the United States. The remainder went to Canada, Australia, France, and other European countries.

[3] Berry lists the "adaptive options" available to non-dominant groups during this process as "integration, assimilation, separation, and marginality," depending upon the extent to which it is valuable to maintain (1) identity and culture and (2) positive intergroup relations. See Berry (1986) for a discussion of each of the modes among immigrants, refugees, and indigenous peoples of North America.

[4] In the documentary video *Blue Collar and Buddha*, (1987: Siegal & Johnston), a group of Vietnam veterans reinforce middle class attitudes of anger and resentment against the Lao community in Chicago, whom they are not able to distinguish from other groups of Southeast Asians.

[5] Estimate by Sonprasit Phrommavanh (Personal Interview: Aug. 1992) of the Southeast Asian Economic Development Center and confirmed by other community leaders.

[6] As of 1989 there were 3,740 such establishments registered in the greater Providence area, as reported in County Business Patterns of Rhode Island, U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (1990).

[7] The sole purpose for this hiring practice, according to Mr. Phrommavanh, was economic. Administrators saw the trilingual Hmong aides as more versatile and less expensive.

CHAPTER VII

THE SAD TALE: A REFUGEE STORY

Thus I Have Heard

Buddhist epistemology views each human mind as capable of attaining the ultimate state of knowing all, if not in this life then perhaps in the next. Embarking on the path toward knowing is akin to entering a stream, the course of which is moderated by the teachings, the meditative techniques, and the code of discipline.

Social philosophies and research methodologies based in American universities are as foreign to Lao ways of thinking as computer chips and milk shakes. However, the collection and transfer of knowledge through folk media, once the exclusive role of the oral specialist, and the application of the historic *dhamma* to community problem solving may be viewed as an endogenous approach that in many ways parallels alternative research paradigms in education and the social sciences. The basic similarity lies in the efforts of both to use the knowledge generated through investigation and reflection to benefit the community from which it is derived.

> Tangles within and tangles without
> Whole community is entangled in a tangle
> I question you Gotama
> Who can disentangle this tangle?[1]

Like the teaching mandate of Buddhism, these approaches tend to eschew dogma, specialization, and narrowly defined versions of evidence. Instead, they lead toward more open-ended, multi-disciplinary paths of inquiry that seek to gain perspectives on the complexities of human problems for the purpose not only of generating new knowledge, but of proposing effective solutions (Lewin 1946; Sanford 1981). The person who can "disentangle this tangle," in Buddhist thought as well as in alternative research modes that stress collaboration and participation, is none other than ourselves.

This does not imply, however, that solutions are simple and formulaic; the central purpose of both action research and Buddhist inquiry is to set into motion a process that raises levels of awareness, knowledge, compassion and wisdom. The long term goal is to enable participants at all levels to shape personal strategies for teaching, learning, and living that are both realistic and visionary.

The Process

As applied to the field of adult continuing education in the United States, the methods and approaches of ethnography, action research, and participatory action research offer a broad enough spectrum of choices and flexibility in design to accommodate diverging world views as they seek out more effective ways of teaching and learning.

Of these methodologies, action research appeared to offer an appropriate framework within which an inquiry into the effectiveness of a folk medium could be conducted. Its proposed cycles of information gathering, action, and reflection also seemed to be synchronous with Lao Buddhist approaches to problem solving, which direct the seeker to first confront the reality of a situation, seek higher levels of knowledge and wisdom, then act with understanding and compassion.

Given the history and applications of action research (Lewin 1946; Sanford 1981), it was clear from the outset that the types of outcomes these cycles might lead to in the Lao-American cultural context would emerge from the interaction between the initial plan, the researcher, the participants, and the cultural context. In general, the purpose of action research is to collect and use data for a social cause (Bogdan & Biklen 1982:218); to initiate or implement a process that will result in a change in the way people perceive their conditions, and ultimately a change in the conditions themselves.

Kurt Lewin, who originated the concept in 1946, proposed progressive cycles of analysis, fact finding, conceptualization, and reflection to simultaneously address social problems and generate new knowledge (Brown & Tandon 1983:278). The action research model has been applied primarily in business and industrial settings as a strategy to investigate and solve problems originating in the workplace by initiating dynamic collaborations between researchers and employees. Action research has also been implemented for the purpose of publicizing inequalities and redressing grievances against educational institutions, but has rarely been initiated by the institutions themselves.

The original model proposed for the Lao folk opera project in Providence (Figure 8) adapted from Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) provided a useful guide for planning the stages of collaboration and reflection, but because of its implementation outside the context of a controlled environment such as an educational institution or workplace, reality soon intervened to undermine its neat linear sequencing.

The guiding principles of action research in the broader context of community, however, are directed less toward solving specific grievances than toward planning for longer term solutions to more complex social problems. The exploration of Lao community issues in Providence from three perspectives, as reported in Chapter 6, yielded qualitative data which suggested that the primary concerns of the groups interviewed did not, in their view, stem directly from conditions of economic or political oppression at a local level, although economic factors were cited as contributing toward the current conditions of feeling "trapped" and unable to cope with the loss of Lao language and codes of discipline among the younger generation.

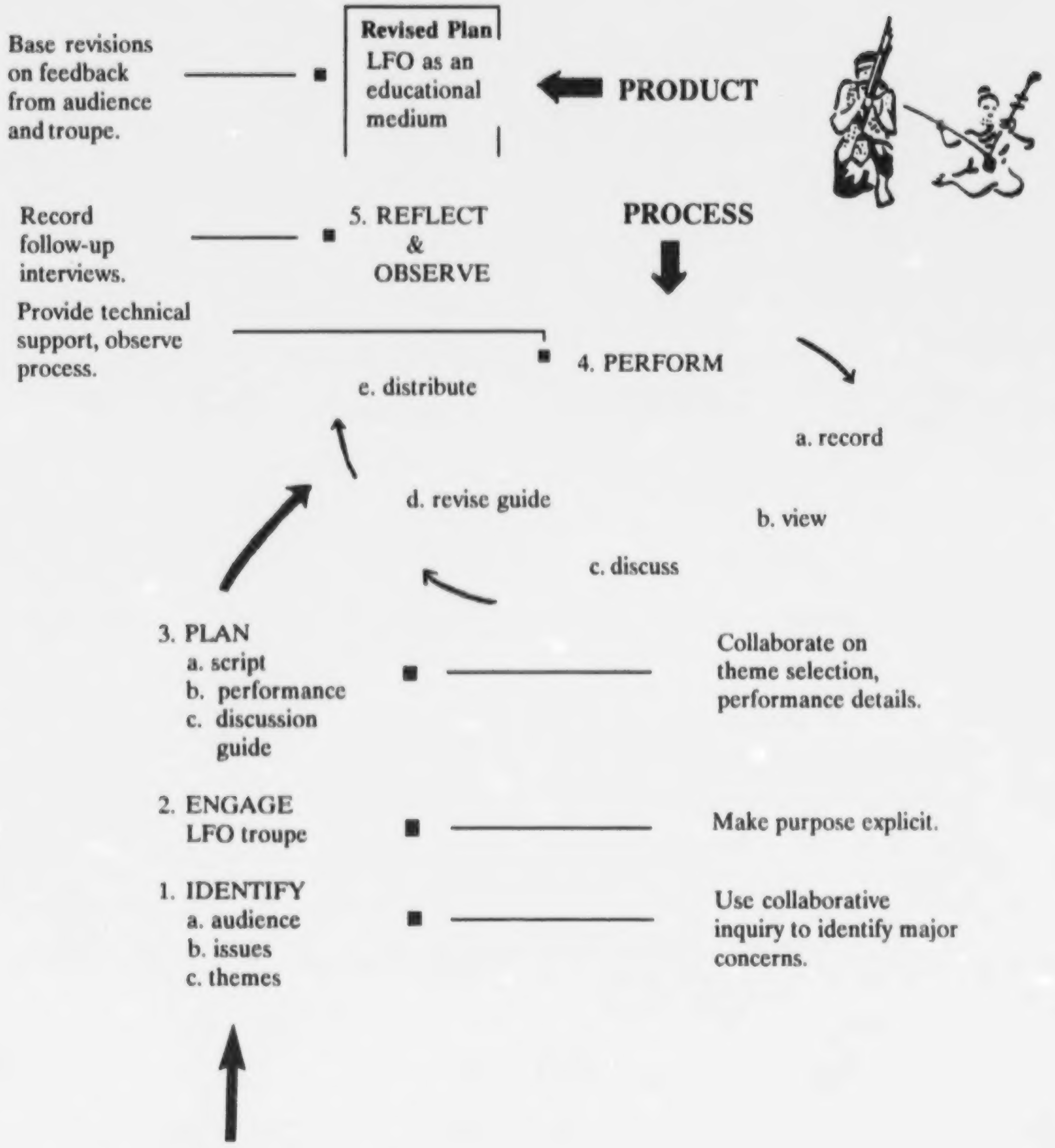
Base revisions on feedback from audience and troupe.
Revised Plan
LFO as an educational medium
PRODUCT
Record follow-up interviews.
5. REFLECT & OBSERVE
PROCESS
Provide technical support, observe process.
4. PERFORM
e. distribute
a. record
d. revise guide
b. view
c. discuss
3. PLAN
a. script
b. performance
c. discussion guide
Collaborate on theme selection, performance details.
2. ENGAGE LFO troupe
Make purpose explicit.
1. IDENTIFY
a. audience
b. issues
c. themes
Use collaborative inquiry to identify major concerns.

Figure 8
Proposed Action Research Model
Lao Folk Arts Project

Personal, family, and community issues are interpreted by the Lao in Providence as inevitable consequences of the migration itself, as manifestations of a series of events over which they had little control. The very definition of "control" and how it could be regained as personal and economic autonomy in the American context seems to be at odds with the political philosophy in which action research is grounded.

Therefore, the question of whether action research would be viable in the Lao-American social context depended on its flexibility in purpose and direction. Could a paradigm devoted to the principle of social change, concerned mainly with the material aspects of human existence in an industrialized society be adapted for use with a population with a completely different set of cultural values?

The story of how a Lao-American community initiated its own action to address a specific problem as reported by Marjorie Muecke (1987), confirmed that such a direction might be possible In 1984, the deaths of two Lao-American men in Seattle were attributed to the presence of a cannibalistic, liver-eating ghost (*phii kha*) who had accompanied the community to Seattle by inhabiting the body of one of the refugees. The spirit continued to terrorize the community until a collaboration between elders and a senior monk caused the ghost to leave the area by repeatedly exhorting the community to "harbor a sense of goodness (*khwaam dii*) towards it and towards each other" (1987:277). Together with individual counseling and protective rituals performed by the monk, these changes successfully overpowered the evil spirit, and brought a sense of control back to the community. According to Muecke, the success of this strategy empowered the community beyond solving the immediate problem by convincing people that their relationship with the spirit world and with their traditionally Lao ways of interacting with it were still operational in America.

> They had reinterpreted the *phii ka* in terms of their being Lao in an American context. In so doing, they acknowledged their Lao-ness,reconfirmed their relationships with each other, and eschewed American intervention. (Muecke 1987:281)

In the Seattle case, the action taken by the community was validated to the academic world through Muecke's anthropological study, and passed on informally to other Lao-American communities by word of mouth. Significantly, the role of the researcher had been to observe, learn, and report rather than to prescribe or propose.

While the Providence community had no single problem as destructive or as clearly personified as the cannibal ghost that haunted the Lao of Seattle, the concerns expressed in the interviews and family gatherings in Providence suggested that the general fear of losing Lao cultural cohesiveness over the long term is a critical issue for its adult members. Exploring existing perceptions of this problem and its artistic expression through the medium of *lam* thus evolved the immediate goal.

Networking

Based on the Seattle case and on my initial understanding of the issues of concern to the Providence community, the adaptability of the research paradigm to the Lao-American cultural context seemed to involve two major considerations. First, neither the paradigm nor the process could be allowed to dictate the parameters of the outcome. Secondly, as researcher, I would have to refrain from dominating the terms and conditions of the action-reflection process. My role, as I began to see it more clearly with increasingly close contact with the community, would be to observe, to learn, to facilitate discussion through collaborative action and reflection, and to report. Otherwise, the field research would become another example of the discontinuity in world views which distances the communities and generations from one another rather than attempting to build bridges between them.

The first step was to seek out an existing context from within the community through which the project could achieve credibility among prospective participants. The initial stages of this search have been described in Chapter 6, resulting in the continuing support of the *sangha* based at Wat Lao Buddhavat and two secular community leaders. These contacts provided the networking which resulted in the initial interviews and eventually, collaboration with the folk opera troupe based in Providence. The purpose of the research was broadly stated as·an effort to (1) learn more about Lao culture in general and Lao folk opera in particular and (2) set into motion a process that would open a dialogue addressing current community issues.

When I attempted to explain this dual purpose to prospective participants, the reaction was usually a combination of amusement, confusion, and guarded approval. With the exception of one of the community leaders, none had been approached by outsiders seeking cultural information about the community.

In time, I abandoned the effort to outline the objectives of the research project in any great detail, finding that my collaborators were far more interested in my intention to "write something to explain to Americans about us" and in my personal background and character. My position was doubtlessly enhanced by identifying myself as a teacher and having traveled to Laos. As I soon discovered, any involvement with the Lao-American community beyond the surface level demands a clear definition of roles, with acceptance based on how thoroughly the outsider is trusted and liked. This trust is earned partially through status and partly through the willingness, at least in this case, to be a respectful student of Lao culture, a regular participant in public community events, and to assist in solving immediate problems when asked.

The choice of language also played a key role in my relations with the community. On the one hand, older people were delighted to be able to communicate their problems to a representative of the dominant culture who would understand them; on the other, I often heard comments comparing that my ability to speak Lao after only two years in northeastern Thailand with their own failure to learn English after over a decade in America, thus contributing to their own self-deprecation. However, my frequent blunders in Lao were also the source of good humor and further discussion of how difficult it is for all of us to learn each others' languages.

Although my level of communicative competence in Lao was adequate for social relationships and group discussions, it did not allow for a complete understanding of the nuances and figurative language used in *lam*. Therefore the tenor of my relationship with the community leaders, the troupe, and with the two research assistants I engaged to assist with interviewing and translation quickly evolved into learning relationships, in which those who might have been labeled "informants" under another paradigm became mentors and advisors in Lao, and whom I in turn assisted with problems associated with living and working in America.

What I did not realize during these preliminary and initial planning stages, was the extent to which the community was already, through the use of endogenous media and support networks, taking action to help itself. At the local level, the Providence community supports a number of cultural activities throughout the year which include traditional music and dance. In addition, Wat Lao Buddhavat and the Southeast Asian Development Council sponsor a range of educational activities, both formal and informal, religious and secular. The video rental sections of Lao food stores in Providence include both entertainment films made in Thailand and documentaries on Lao history and culture. There are two Lao newspapers published in California, and a multitude of music cassettes produced by Lao musicians the United States and Canada. The *moh lam* troupe based in Providence, of which a detailed description follows, has more invitations to perform than it can accept.

Therefore, to enter the community with my action research model, as a self-proclaimed "agent of change," was neither legitimate nor realistic. The change was already taking place at its own pace, within its own constructs. I was, in accordance with Lewin's (1946) original plan, more on a fact-finding mission which could eventually, over the course of several more cycles of inquiry, result in a plan for effective problem-solving if adapted and continued by the community.

Community members were well aware of the problem of cultural discontinuity long before I set foot in their homes, and had organized action to initiate steps toward its solution in much the same way as they had organized to form a support network for newly arrived Lao immigrants. However, from my point of view, it seemed that the problem of communication, of misunderstanding and being misunderstood, of feeling "trapped" in a web of inexpressiveness which now short-circuited their attempts to connect not only with other Americans, but also with their own children. In other words, at this stage of their acculturation process, the community was successfully coping with certain of its problems at one level, yet at the same time was being confronted with new dilemmas as a new generation of children were in the process of growing up American.

At this level, it seemed that the more appropriate application of the research project would be to learn about and to report on the changes already taking place, and possibly to help focus my collaborators' direction and artistic expression in a way that might precipitate dissemination to a wider audience. I was, as Lewin (1946:37) put it, on a reconnaissance mission. Describing the function and position of research within social planning and action, Lewin wrote:

> Planning starts usually with something like a general idea. For one person or another it seems desirable to reach a certain objective. Exactly how to circumscribe this objective, and how to reach it is frequently not too clear. The first step then is to examine the idea carefully in the light of the means available. Frequently more fact-finding about the situation about the situation is required.(Lewin 1946:37)

The facts thus uncovered could then, Lewin suggested, be used to design an "overplan" of how to reach the larger objective, the solution to the problem, and secondly how to plan the next step of action.

As the sources on the social, artistic, and educational functions of *lam* among the lowland Lao of the Mekong valley suggest, the medium is integral to Lao ethnicity. In Seattle, the Lao-American community needed to marshall its own cultural resources to solve the problem of the cannibal ghost because Western medical solutions were powerless in this context. The community was thus able to use their own effective handling of the ghoul to "legitimize their position in an American context and thereby to reinforce their position as standard-bearers of Lao ethnicity" (Muecke: 1987:283). In this sense, each *suu khwaan* ritual, each wedding ceremony, each festival is in effect a cycle of preparation, action, and reflection that reinforces the sense of common heritage and reconfirms communal commitment to preserving that heritage (De Vos & Romanucci-Ross 1982:365).

In this way, the objectives of the fact-fiding mission on *moh lam* gradually became less grandiose and more tangible. In contrast to the *pungwe* in Zimbabwe, there was no need to train community members or the performance artists themselves in order to revive the medium. There did, however, appear to be some need for external support of the revival that was already going on, both by documenting the history and development of the troupe in Providence, and internally by supporting the distribution and discussion of performances in the home video format.

The immediate goal of the project thus evolved as an inquiry into the revival and validation of *lam* as a means of dramatizing the refugee experience through characterization and symbolic action in a way that would invite dialogue on community issues. The longer term goal remained to generate more detailed knowledge about the performance of *lam* in an immigrant community, and to gain from this experience further insights into how endogenous media can be used for community-based education within the broader dynamic of an evolving multicultural society.

Learning

Having narrowed the goals of the "fact-finding mission" to exploring and documenting the the revival of a folk medium in a context limited by time and space, the first task was to find out what had already transpired. Information on Providence-based troupe, which presently performs under the stage name *Asia Bantheungsin*, was gathered mainly through informal interviews with two of the group's lead singers, the *khaen* player, and several of the supporting singers and band members. Having first observed the troupe in performance at the Boston Children's Museum in 1990, I made contact with them again in 1992 through Mr. Phongsavanh. After meeting with lead singer Phinphone Ratsabout in May, I was introduced to the other lead singers and proceeded to negotiate the terms of a performance agreement and was invited to attend several rehearsal sessions and performances thereafter.

Negotiation

During my initial conversations with troupe members on June 2, I quickly learned that none of the performers felt competent enough to be able to improvise *lam* on a given theme or to compose a new *luang* based on community problems. My assumptions that such talents were commonplace among *moh lam* had been based on the observations and reputations of highly skilled singers I had observed in Laos and northeastern Thailand some 25 years before. As mentioned earlier (Chapter 5), the singers in the Providence troupe do not consider themselves highly accomplished, nor does their theatrical performance style allow for the free interweaving of themes and issues in the manner of the *lam puen* artists or the troupes engaged by USIS for propaganda purposes in the late 1960's.

Fortunately, however, the troupe was already in possession of a script based on an actual refugee experience composed by their master and adviser, Mr. Guay Suangawn. After discussing the list of issues and concerns I had compiled (Table 4, p. 242 of this dissertation) with two of the troupe members, they excitedly declared that this *luang* (story), which was the only contemporary script in their repertoire thus far, was exactly what I was looking for. The next question was whether the story, entitled *Yaad Namtaa Sao Lao Vieng* (The Sad Tale of a Girl from Vieng Chan), could be adapted to a home video format, as opposed to the marathon live performance context. The four lead singers were confident that this could be done, primarily by eliminating the rock musical interludes that normally intervened between theatrical scenes. They also commented that if the purpose of the video I proposed was mainly to get viewers to discuss the story, not just to entertain them, it would be advisable to cut out these embellishments.

During this negotiation session, I was informed that during certain performance segments, particularly during the soliloquies, singers do not necessarily stick to the script verbatim, and therefore would keep the relatively serious, issue-oriented nature of the proposed performance in mind. However, this was not perceived as "improvisation" in the sense I had originally suggested. In this way, the singers agreed, by adapting the script and even departing from it from time to time, they could allude to and emphasize certain points in my list were not already there.

Before reaching an agreement on the terms of performance, including the date, place, and performance fee, the stage manager informed me that he would have to discuss the proposal with the whole troupe. At issue was the impending departure for California of one of the lead singers, Ms. Manivone Lasavath. Considered the troupe's most talented singer and cast in the lead role in *Yaad Namtaa,* her absence would create a major delay if not an insurmountable obstacle in terms of mounting a studio performance within the foreseeable future.

Following the advice of Cecily Cook (Personal Interview Oct. 4, 1991) of the Refugee Arts Group, who had contracted with the same troupe three years earlier for their performance at the Boston Children's Museum, I offered the troupe a flat fee of $825 for adapting and performing the script at the Amherst Community Television studio. This amount, which had been written into the grant from the Southeast Asia Council, was immediately accepted without further negotiation.

In further communication prior to the performance, the stage manager requested confirmation on the date, time, and fee amount. They also specifically asked at what point and in what form the money would be passed. Following my instincts, I proposed that out agreement be formalized by a written contract (see Appendix C) and that the full performance fee would be paid in cash on completion of the performance in Amherst. After this was agreed upon, there was no further mention of fee, other than the fact that their income for an evening's live performance would be higher.

Mr. Ratsabout later reported to me that there had been little discussion about the performance proposal other than the questions regarding the form of payment. Members were particularly enthusiastic about the possibility of producing a higher quality videotape than the ones that had been recorded at their live performances. Rehearsal time for the adaptation was limited, however, and some apprehension about the physical conditions for the performance was expressed.

The date of Saturday, June 20 was set for the performance, and a contract agreement was drawn up and signed.

The major rehearsal for this video version of *Yaad Namtaa* took place the weekend of June 6 & 7. At that point, the main points of collaboration were related to the type of musical accompaniment and the arrangements for hanging scenery at the ACTV studio. Pre-production planning was assigned mainly to the technical team assembled at ACTV, and artistic direction was left primarily to the troupe. We mutually agreed upon the *khaen* and keyboard players as the sole musicians, and affirmed that we would construct a set that would simulate the stage setting with which the troupe was familiar.

Because the troupe had not performed in a television studio before, they had little idea of what to expect. Discussions of technical equipment needed for the June 20 performance therefore focused on sound and lighting arrangements for videotaping versus amplification and footlights used in live performance before large audiences. In the atmosphere of mutual trust that soon developed during the rehearsal phase, it was decided to leave the set construction, miking, and lighting decisions to the ACTV crew, but for a troupe member to have control over certain aspects of the theatrical lighting plan, primarily to dim the lights for the night scenes. Artistic decisions about which scenes to cut or condense were left entirely to the troupe, with the understanding that the major themes of migration, loss, and cultural conflict would remain intact.

The Performance

The selection of Amherst as the site for the videotaping of *Yaad Namtaa* was based on practical considerations of budget and availability. The studio facility at ACTV made high quality recording and editing equipment available at relatively low cost, resulting in a 3/4" master which could produce multiple copies with minimal generational loss. The choice did not pose a particular problem for the troupe, who spent the evening of the 19th in Worcester before proceeding to Amherst on the morning of the 20th in a convoy of five cars, which arrived promptly at the studio at the designated time.

Preparations

The ACTV crew, assembled from among a pool of experienced community television volunteers, had implemented a basic plan for sound and lighting the day before the scheduled performance. A batten was hung from the lighting grid to which the troupe's painted canvas backdrop, approximately 8 x 3 meters, could be tied.

Soon after their arrival at the studio, the performers set about putting on their makeup and costumes for the performance. The stage manager, who also had a minor role in the performance, and the *khaen* player supervised the hanging of the scenery and collaborated with the technical crew in the final lighting and miking decisions. To help create the effect of live performance conditions, the placement of the backdrop created an area large enough to function as a backstage retreat for the performers to rest and make costume changes between scenes.

In addition to the crew, a small group of interested viewers, including several Lao-speaking Cambodians from Amherst and Northampton, had assembled as a studio audience. In the final phases of preparation, a signaling system consisting of cue cards and hand signs was developed between the technical director, the floor manager, and the troupe's stage manager.

Studio Taping

The major restriction on the troupe's live performance style was that imposed by the time limitations inherent in video recording. A two-hour performance had been agreed upon, with a break at mid-point for changing tapes and revolving crew positions if necessary. As mentioned earlier, intermissions are not usually taken by the performers, but long backstage periods allow for refreshment and rest. Therefore, the main points of the signaling system were the mutually understood visual cues for silence, countdown, time warnings, and wrap up.

Ultimately, the troupe's readiness to begin was indicated by the unannounced *wai khruu* (respect to the teacher) ceremony which took place behind the canvas backdrop as final sound checks were being performed by the technical crew. In this ritual, homage is chanted to the Triple Gem (the Buddha, the *dhamma*, and the *sangha*) as well as to the troupe's mentor, and special power is requested for the *moh lam* to sustain energy and melodious sound. Water which has been blessed, and is believed to have magical properties, is partaken of by each performer for strength and good luck.

The three-camera switching strategy devised ahead of time for the performance was intended to achieve a sense of drama and intimacy between performers and home audience. The plan was for a conventional sequence of two-shots, close-ups of, and a standard safety shot of the whole scene. Microphones were hung for the actors, and floor mikes arranged for the *khaen* and the offstage narrative. The lighting board was set for switching between day and night scenes, and the studio monitor positioned within view of the troupe stage manager.

After a dry rehearsal of the start-up sequence, the taping was underway. During the course of recording the first roll, both troupe and crew became relatively comfortable with the studio environment and with the switching strategy. The main technical difficulty lay in anticipating the variations in volume and the blending of *khaen*, keyboard and voice. Since the performers on stage were not singing directly into microphones, as they would in a live performance, they tended to ignore the positions of

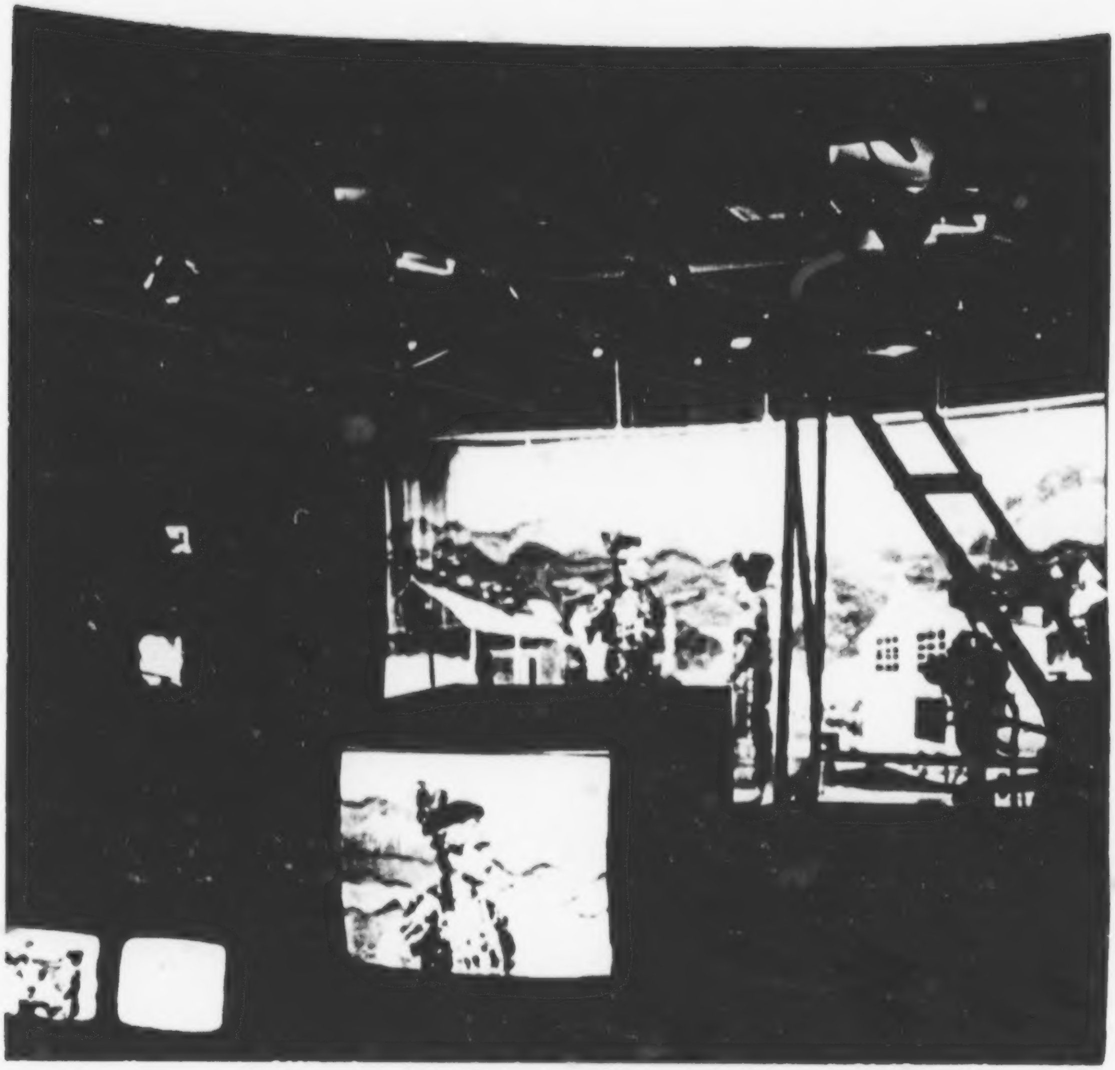

Figure 9
Yaad Namtaa in Production at ACTV

the hanging mikes and freely distanced themselves from them with impromptu blocking moves that would not have occurred in live performance. Consequently, the audio technician was kept very busy trying to compensate for these variations during the first hour of taping.

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During the second roll, the troupe was much more relaxed and more thoroughly into their dramatic rolls. They had also become proficient about anticipating the switching strategy and, when not engaged in dramatic exchanges, played more directly to the cameras. Toward the end of the second roll, however, at the 20 minute cue, the troupe became aware of the difficulty of condensing the remainder of the story into the remaining time period. This caused some distraction, and resulted in a rather abrupt ending.

Given the proposed purpose of the videotape, however, it was mutually decided during the troupe reflection session that the absence of a standard dramatic resolution might, in fact, be turned to advantage by asking viewers to compose their own endings. In this way, the troupe helped plan the discussion guide for families while compensating for their difficulties in adapting to the time restrictions inherent to the medium.

Plot Summary

In the traditional *moh lam luang* performance style, each singer strides onto the stage and introduces his or her character directly to the audience. In *Yaad Namtaa*, this sequence was preceded by a brief offstage narration, introducing the time, place, and situation. Each sung self-introduction also offers an opportunity for the singer to demonstrate vocal prowess and dancing talent prior to the character's entry into the dramatic dialogue. In a typical introduction, a character gives relevant background information in *lam*, then speaks regarding his current plight or situation, then launches into lam again at a stepped up pace, and concludes with a demonstration of dance movement accompanied by the *khaen*. Thereafter, the progress of the story is interrupted frequently by soliloquies in which the characters reconnect directly with the audience, breaking down the observational distance of more formal theatre. The cast of characters and a summary of the plot follow:

Yaad Namtaa Sao Lao Vieng

"The Sad Tale of a Girl from Vieng Chan"[2]

by Guay Saungun
as adapted and performed by "Asia Banthuangsin"
Moh Lam Luang Troupe
June 20, 1992

translated by Bounthavy Khampangna

Characters: (in order of appearance)

NOUKHANE: Pathet Lao officer assigned to capture Phaytoune

PHAYTOUNE: former officer in the Royal Lao Army, a fugitive from the Pathet Lao, husband of Viengkham

VIENGKHAM: Young woman from Vientiane married to Phaytoune, two months pregnant at the beginning of the story

KHAMPOUN: Neighbor and friend of Viengkham's family

KHAMPHONG: Lao government official (under both regimes), family friend of Viengkham and Phaytoune

KHUN: Male comic character, friend of Phaytoune in the U.S.

KHAMNANG: Lonely widow living in the U.S., having settled in New England some 10 years prior to Phaytoune's arrival

BUENG: Comic female character, friend of Khamnang

Setting

Scene 1: Vientiane Province, around 1978

Scene 2: A refugee camp in Nong Khai

Scene 3: A Lao-American community in New England, about 1982

[1] As the story begins, Viengkham longs for her prior life of comfort and stability before the Communist takeover. She laments her current situation, and worries about the future of her unborn child. Phaytoune must hide in the jungle by day, and visit her only occasionally at night. Noukhane, the Pathet Lao officer who has been assigned the job of arresting Phaytoune is hot on his trail. He knows that if caught, he will be detained in a "seminar" for an indefinite period of time. Viengkham agrees with her husband that he has no choice but to escape across the Mekong. He promises to return for her when the time is right.

[2] On the Lao bank, Phaytoune regrets leaving his homeland, but feels that he can no longer survive in Laos. He nearly drowns getting across the river, but once across, begins to marvel at the prosperity of Thailand in the form of paved roads, tall buildings, and electric power lines. He makes

his way to the refugee camp, is interviewed, and is assigned a number.

Several months later, Viengkham has not yet heard from her husband. Noukhane eventually arrests her and confiscates their property. In jail, she reflects that she has done nothing wrong. She still believes that she will be protected from further misfortune by the merit (*boun*) she has accumulated throughout her life. Yet she laments that her life has become full of sadness, and there is no one to take care of her and the baby.

Eventually, Viengkham is freed, but has suffered a miscarriage. She now has no home, no means of livelihood, and no husband. She tries to find her mother in another area of Vientiane, but is told by a sympathetic neighbor (Khampoun) that her mother is dead. At this point, the distraught Viengkham decides to flee Laos, too, having nothing left to live for there. Together with Khampoun and Khampong, an old friend of Phaytoune's who has also decided that the time has come to leave. The three friends make their escape under cover of darkness, in the company of hundreds of other refugees,

[3] In the meantime, Phaytoune has found his way to America and meets Khun, a comic character who offers to show him the ropes. As Khun speeds along an Interstate highway toward a shopping mall in New England, Phaytoune takes in the technological wonders of suburban America, reflecting on the very different world of the Lao countryside.

While at the mall, the two comic characters (Bueng and Khun) meet and decide to introduce their friends, Khamnang and Phaytoune to each other. Phaytoune quickly falls victim to Khamnang's charms, having totally forgotten the wife he left behind, and marries her within a few short weeks. They settle into Khamnang's comfortable suburban home.

In time, Viengkham and her two friends find their way to America. Having received no word from or about Phaytoune, she anxiously tries to find out where he is. Eventually, she obtains his address from a reluctant community member, and appears unannounced at his doorstep. When the two women learn that they are both Phaytoune's wives, they begin to compete for his love and loyalty. Caught between them, Phaytoune seeks to mediate by apologizing to Viengkham while allowing Khamnang to vent her anger and maintain control over the situation. She recognizes that Phaytoune has lied to her, yet is afraid of losing him.

An accommodation is reached by allowing Vienkham to stay with them, at least temporarily, until a solution can be reached. Phaytoune had never expected to see Viengkham again, yet is now reminded of his life with her in Laos, and is tormented by the guilt. He is also paralyzed by his dependence on Khamnang in terms of his own ability to make a living in America. Khamnang mercilessly plots to get rid of Viengkham, and plans to lay a trap by falsely accusing her of stealing a gold necklace (taped version ends here).

In the end, with the help of her friend Khamnoun, Viengkham decides that her only hope for survival in America is to depend on no one but herself. She is advised to learn English, take advantage of available economic subsidies such as food stamps and Medicaid, and to get a good job. In this new existence, with all her hopes for restoring the world she knew in Laos forever dashed, she resolves to find the strength within herself and the resources in the community to build a new life.

Reflections

The reflection phase of the project included gathering the reactions to *Yaad Namtaa* of the family which had participated in the issue identification discussion as well as those of the troupe and other individuals involved in mounting the performance. The two Lao university students who had assisted in the interviews and the translation of *Yaad Namtaa* were as anxious to offer their own explanations and reflections as they were to gather the opinions of the family audience in Providence. It also became difficult, especially in the construction of the discussion guide, to separate my own interpretation of character and theme from those I was attempting to elicit. Having reached the conclusion that each of these perspectives is important in its own way, they have all been included. In the interest of prioritizing community reactions as central to the outcome of the fieldwork, however, I have for the most part withheld my own interpretations until their expression as conclusions in the next and final chapter.

Family

The discussion guide for *Yaad Namtaa* was first designed with the idea of asking the audience to identify and discuss key themes in terms of how they might reflect current concerns in the community. Before arranging to facilitate a discussion with the Providence family, I tested the first set of questions with a family who had not been involved with the first phase of the project and who live in another New England community. The elders in the latter family are long time devotees of *lam*, and were delighted to be invited to participate. I soon discovered, however, that the task of identifying themes and interpreting key exchanges did not serve to elicit meaningful discussion. The participants were, instead, anxious to retell the story, recall funny situations, and chat about their own arrival experiences.

This pre-test of the guide led to its revision in a way that would indirectly seek to elicit personal reflections as opposed to the analytical, interpretive responses originally saught. The test case family participants responded more fully and enthusiastically to questions about the *luang* itself than they did to direct questions about their own experiences or about community problems. For example, questions such as "How does Viengkham's departure from Laos relate to your own experience?" or "How does this story reflect current problems in the Lao community?" evoked little other than embarrassed silence.

I therefore set about purging the guide of such requests, and focussed instead on items which called for comment on the characters, such as "Did Viengkham make the right decision?" and "Why didn't Phaytoune keep his promise to her?" These types of questions were particularly effective when followed up with further (gently stated) requests for reasons, examples, and information.

In Providence, the discussion using the revised guide was held in the family home following a ceremony at Wat Lao Buddhavat (August 2, 1992). Family members preferred not to have this session tape recorded,[3] but had no objection to my taking extensive notes.

The videotape of *Yaad Namtaa* had been sent a week in advance, and most of the family members had viewed the story twice. The conditions for discussion were extremely relaxed, with the male family members engaged off and on in the cooperative repair of a light fixture, and two of the women exiting and entering with fresh supplies of noodles, drinks, and watermelon. Participating in the discussion were the parents from Xieng Khouang, a family friend, an aunt, three adult children (ages 28, 24, and 22) and a cousin. Several young children and a baby were also present, but did not participate in the discussion. Beginning with a general discussion of *moh lam* in America, the parents and younger adults said that they enjoyed watching the tape because it "brings back memories," particularly the sound of the *khaen* and the humorous, poetic style of performance intrinsic to *lam*. However, the aunt commented that she did not like this *luang* because it made her think about her problems. She preferred instead the stories about old folk tales and legends. I also learned, during this preliminary phase of the discussion, that people from northern Laos are not as devoted to *lam* as the southern Lao of the river valleys. The style of dress, music, dialect, and script used in Xieng Khouang are markedly different from the Savannakhet and Vientiane Lao, who were the main performers in *Yaad Namtaa*.

However, the father recalled with amusement that he had courted the children's mother with a local style of *lam*, a fact that the young adults had not been aware of, and which led to a good deal of light-hearted teasing throughout the course of the discussion. Further explanations about the various genre of nonprofessional *lam* and the *gawn* (poetry) from which it is derived followed, with the father mentioning that these were often used to keep people's spirits up during the long periods of hiding in caves during the war.

As the discussion turned to *Yaad Namtaa*, I used the guide to open up areas for discussion, attempting to follow up at certain junctures, but not press for further comments or to force the discussion to stay strictly on track. No time limits were imposed, and the discussion came to a natural close after about two hours. The first question was posed in this way:

1. After Viengkham found out that her mother had died, she decided to leave Laos to look for her husband. Do you think that was a good decision?

The comments made in response, upon which all participants agreed, supported the choice of the fictional character for both cultural and political reasons. The following three excerpts show how the opening comment about Viengkham quickly led to a discussion of conditions under the LDPR, hence to justification for the participants' own choices.

> a. She was still married to him, so she had to follow. Otherwise, she would be worried about what the community (in Laos) might think about her.
>
> b. Of course she had to leave. She had no choice. If you are smarter than them (the communist government) they will find a way to bring you down.
>
> c. If you don't leave, they will use drugs to brainwash you.
>
> (Family Gathering, Aug. 2, 1992)

The second question (Why do you think Phaytoune forgot about his wife?) did not bring about much discussion. The participants agreed that it was natural and to be expected that Phaytoune would behave this way. The follow-up question of whether any young husbands could be expected to be faithful was, in effect, avoided; however, in response to an alternative question, participants did not feel that Phaytoune was "bad" for having forgotten his wife in Laos. It was also suggested that Viengkham blamed herself for his infidelity, yet could not do anything about it. This theme is echoed throughout the text in the repetition of Viengham's mournful line, "There is nothing I can do, there is nothing left for me but sadness and tears."

The third area for discussion was opened by posing a general question about the nature of the refugee experience though an indirect question:

> 3. At the end of the story, Viengkham has nothing - no family, no husband, no job. How can she survive in America? What advice would you give her?

Responses took the form of the group explaining to me, as an American who had not been through the refugee experience, what it is like to be a newcomer:

> a. You feel helpless, like an "island person" (*khon ko*), you have to take what you can get.
>
> b. First you have to make contact with the Lao community....before, this was a problem because there was no (Lao) community here...The Hmong helped us too. Now a new refugee can get a lot of help...they can stay with other Lao until they can get on their feet.
>
> c. She could stay with us...first we would try to stop her from committing suicide. We would take her to social security and the clinic for a check-up...We would help her friends, too. You have to stick with your old friends and find new ones, too. We Lao like to stick together. We would show (the new arrivals) how to use the bus system, how to learn to drive. We have done this many times.
>
> d. When we came here, some other Lao and some Hmong showed us around. They showed us how to live in these houses, and how to clean them.
>
> e. We wanted to work, we didn't want to go on welfare. I got a job as a housekeeper. Our family was only on welfare for four months.
>
> (Family Gathering August 2, 1992)

The fourth and final area of discussion pertained to the present and future of the Lao immigrant community. Again the question was posed in terms of Viengkham's fate. At this point, however, there was far less concern about the fictional character than about the realities of life in Providence. The range of concerns expressed is reflective of the issues identified in the earlier family gathering and individual interviews, but this time the speakers were more openly critical.

4. What do you think will happen to Viengkham after a few years in America?

a. She will have to sell her jewelry to bribe the boatman. She will have to learn how to tell lies in order to survive.

b. I still miss home...it was easy to go out, to have friends and talk to people. We had to leave, we had no choice. I never feel confident here, I don't understand everything. I think about home a lot.

c. You can't depend on others so much here. You have to learn to depend on yourself.

d. You know, the law here is in favor of the children. They say they are free, but to them it means that the parents have no authority. They (the children) do whatever they want to.

e. The parents don't understand the school system...why don't the teachers discipline the children, teach them what is right and wrong? They just blame us.

f. They (the school system) discriminate against the Lao. They say they have bilingual teachers, but they never hire any Lao...only Hmong, to save money. They don't understand or teach anything about Lao culture.

g. We have to stick together...to keep our culture; it's all we have left. No matter where you go...if you speak Lao, eat sticky rice and can hear the sound of the *khaen*, then you are Lao. We don't live in Laos any more, but we are still Lao.
(Family Gathering August 2, 1992)

When asked to react in general to the performance, it was reiterated that older people prefer folk tales and legends to contemporary themes, and the younger generation might like *lam* more if it were more "modern." Although the young adults who participated in this discussion said they enjoyed the videotaped version of *Yaad Namtaa*, they felt that teenagers would not want to watch it for fear of being made fun of. They all felt the troupe sang well, but not as well as some Lao singers. It was agreed, however, that their dramatic skills could be better, and suggested that they take acting lessons.

Following the discussion, while the men returned to the repair of the lighting fixture in earnest, two of the young adults talked further of their efforts to form a dance troupe which would train children in the community and perform at local events. The discussion, they said, as well as the work of the *moh lam* troupe, had inspired them to persist in this effort in the form of a mounting a fund-raiser for Wat Lao Buddhavat. They also expressed their hope that these kinds of activities would serve to open up further cross-cultural dialogue between Lao-American parents and children as well as between Lao-Americans and the wider Providence community.

Troupe

Informal reflections on the part of troupe members were made during a long rehearsal for another performance approximately four weeks after *Yaad Namtaa* was taped at ACTV. The stage manager was apologetic for not having completed the full story within the two hours designated, but otherwise was generally pleased with the performance. Performers were also generally satisfied with the switching strategy because "it looks like American TV" and pleased with the sound. On the negative side, several comments were made about the color balance not appearing true, especially in comparison to the quality of the color photographs that were taken the same day. Otherwise, the *khaen* player and performers were quite pleased with their performance, and with the technical quality of the tape. However, they felt it would not be suitable for commercial distribution because the two hour time limit restricted them from telling the full story.

In his interpretation of the story, lead singer Phinphone Ratsabout, who played the part of the Pathet Lao officer in *Yaad Namtaa*, said that the purpose of the script is to "show the Lao people in America how to get control over their lives again" (Troupe Rehearsal August 8, 1992):

> In the beginning, you have to accept handouts, welfare...whatever you can get. You may have to tell lies to survive. If people see this story, maybe they will try harder; they won't just give up. You have to try really hard here.

In specific comments about the videotape, the performers felt that old people and perhaps the middle generation would like it, but that the young people would not be interested because the rock band had been eliminated from the performance. Lead singer Phinphone reiterated that the their purpose as a group was to preserve the old traditions, but also to incorporate the new.

The singers and musicians I spoke to that evening agreed, however, that the videotape was useful for viewers who "just wanted to see and understand the story." Also, for their own purposes, it would be useful as a teaching tool and a promotional piece. They also agreed that it was a good sample of their work for non-Lao Americans to see, and liked the idea of adding subtitles to the video.

Further conversations with individuals that evening turned to the subject of the training techniques they were using to with apprentice singers, their own immigration experiences as well as their criticisms of educational practices in the United States. The informal interview method I used at this point involved observing and asking about the techniques the more experienced *moh lam* were using, which led to explanations and discussions of the differences between those techniques and those used in educational settings in America. One band member, a welder by trade, made the following comment:

> I was already qualified as a welder in Laos, but when I came here I had to study again for a license. It was in a technical college in California....the teacher would only show us once, then go back to his desk. He didn't really help us much....he didn't seem to care. If you show us something and help us, we can do it...you see how we learn to play and sing? We do it over and over again. They (experienced band members) help us get over our shyness. They sing with us until we have the confidence to do it alone. Americans just want to test you...they don't care. (Troupe Rehearsal August 8, 1992)

On more than one occasion, the notion of having to be tough to make it in America emerged, whereupon it was confirmed that this was a major theme of *Yaad Namtaa*. However, when asked if Viengkham would have to do it all by herself, troupe members concurred that the Lao-American community would help her. Like the family, the troupe agreed that she needed to rely on herself more here than she would have in Laos, but that she was not completely alone in this strange new world. The community would help her learn how to cope, to acquire the tools she would need to survive.

Individuals

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the two university students who participated in the fieldwork as research assistants also had valuable comments to make on the performance of *Yaad Namtaa*, as well as on the project in general. Again, the method of gathering data was one in Lao participants assumed the role of providing information to an outside investigator. As personal relationships grew in terms of trust and friendship, the sharing of personal experiences became increasingly detailed and critical.

The student in Providence had, in initial conversations, described himself in search of his "Lao-ness", and credited his father with having helped him initiate and maintain this search. In his reflection on the interviewing process, the student in Providence wrote:

> As you already know, about half of my life is spent in the United States; and I know very little about Laos. Your project has broaden (sic) my understanding about Laos more than I anticipated. (Chantharangsy Letter: July 6, 1992)

In his dialogue with older community members outside his own family, the interviewer was able to broaden his own perspective. In reflection, he was critical of some of the interviewees for not opening up more, and felt that for some the presence of the tape recorder had been intimidating (a factor which contributed to the decision not to tape record the family gatherings or the *moh lam* rehearsals).

The young man who assisted in the translation of the initial interviews and of *Yaad Namtaa* is a recent arrival from Laos who, as an unaccompanied minor resettled in Northampton, is not part of the Providence community. The translator felt that I should have interviewed more "educated" members of the community, but believed that I probably learned more by having the Providence student interview them than I would have by asking them questions myself:

> So that's why you paid that guy to ask them...because you knew they wouldn't tell you anything. (Khampangna Interview: August 18, 1992)

In his general comments on *Yaad Namtaa*, the translator enjoyed the tape to the extent of asking for a copy to send to his relatives in Canada. An ardent movie-goer in America, he felt that the quality of this version was "better than usual," but would have liked it to have more action and more changes of scenery.

In his explanation of why Lao refugees (including himself) were attracted to America, the translator commented that "One hundred percent of the refugees believed that the United States would be paradise...they never realized that they would have to change their way of life in order to live here" (Khampangna Interview: August 18, 1992). In follow-up comments on how these ways of life differ, the translator elaborated on the Lao concepts of generosity and cooperation, as practiced at the village level. "In America," in contrast, "you have to be selfish."

Throughout the translation and transcription of both the taped interviews and of *Yaad Namtaa*, this young man contributed increasingly as a participant through his own critical reflections on the characters' speeches and actions. He also began to bring excerpts from his own collection of recorded Lao music to demonstrate the wider variety of contemporary musical genre used to express critical social commentary in Thailand, Laos, and in the U.S. Lao community.

Thus, in keeping with the objectives of the fieldwork as a fact-finding mission, the first of many spirals in an action research project that would be directed toward "disentangling this tangle" of long term community woes. To the question of who can solve these problems, there is not one, but many answers. Each of the participants had a distinct role in identifying issues and suggesting approaches. The value of these diverse perspectives is enhanced in the consideration of their potential applications as educational solutions through planning, facilitation, and media design.

Notes

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[1] One of two verses from the discourses of the Buddha which were made famous by the commentary written in the form of a thesis by the fifth century Sri Lankan scholar, Buddhaghosha. The second verse describes the levels and kinds of knowledge needed to become an effective community problem solver, as translated from Pali by Hewage (1986:52):

> A human being endowed with (native) intelligence
> Who establishes himself well in virtue,
> Develops his mind and his intelligence (wisdom)
> If he is skilled in controlling his senses and
>   applying his intelligence
> Such a person can disentangle this tangle.

[2] Also referred to as "Viengkham's Story" by both the troupe and the audience, and presented as "River of Tears" for ACTV broadcast purposes.

[3] The family did not express an outright refusal to be recorded, but said they would feel "more comfortable" without the tape rolling.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSIONS

In response to original research question, which asks how Lao folk opera can function as an issue-oriented learning medium in a refugee community, both the literature review and the community based action research project reported in Chapter 7 have produced several insights. Given the design of the action research project and the epistemological theory in which it is grounded, these discoveries are more appropriately expressed as reflections based on the observational and ethnographic data rather than conclusive claims about either the community or the medium.

In keeping with Lewin's (1946) assertation that the initial cycle of any long-term community based research is exploratory by nature, these reflections are made in the form of a process analysis that would produce suggestions for the grounding of a hypothetical consecutive cycle of collaborative research with the same community. In addition, suggestions for the design and implementation of learning media for informal community education in the Lao-American context are made.

The review of literature on folk drama, Buddhist epistemology, community education practices in Laos, and the educational applications of folk drama in Lao society offer ample evidence that *lam* was and is an effective popular medium for popular community education in the rural Lao social context. The action research project, in its exploration of the role of *lam* in the Lao-American community of Providence approximately 15 years after its beginnings, occurred at a point in time when that very role is still in the initial stages of being established and defined.

The performance cycle of *Yaad Namtaa* served to open a dialogue within the family gathering on current community issues that suggested constructive approaches based on a combination the application of the Lao-Buddhist code of ethics and the practical strategies developed for coping with resettlement issues during the transition phase. It also served to validate the troupe's self-perception as media artists actively involved in cultural preservation and the creation of positive role models for Lao-American youth. The community television production experience using dramatic lighting and switching strategies openly stimulated their interest in adapting additional scripts to the home video format for production and distribution to a wider audience.

Because of the nature of collaboration with community leaders, troupe members, and the family of audience-participants, the information and perspectives reported during the course of the action research project are relative to the specific concerns and conditions of the Lao-American community of Providence in the early 1990's. Reflections on the approach to collaborative research with endogenous media-makers in a multicultural society may be applicable in the planning stages of similar projects in other communities at different stages of acculturation and development.

Redefining Parameters

During the initial period of contact with the community, I began to realize that the research question was unnecessarily loaded with the stipulation that the medium be "issue-oriented," With the identification of cultural loss and recovery as the current underlying issue in the long-term resettlement process, the very existence of a *moh lam* troupe in Rhode Island and the evolution of its artistic and theatrical style is a manifestation of current concerns. Whether the troupe chooses to present Lao legends, *Jataka* tales, or *luang* based on contemporary resettlement issues, the performances reflect the troupe's efforts to incorporate both old and new. In Muecke's terms (1987), a primary educational function of the troupe can be understood as a medium for creating the voice with which to articulate a variety of responses to the questions, "Why are we here?" and "Can we still be Lao in America?"

Therefore, one consequence of the action research cycle of *Yaad Namtaa* was to redefine parameters of the "overplan" (Lewin 1946), to enlarge it to fit the reality of a medium as it is struggling to find its voice and establish its role in the expression of the Lao-American experience. As a result of constant re-examination and revision, the relationship between researcher and collaborators became less tightly controlled, yet more clearly defined. Still process-oriented, the question redefined asks, "What is the role of Lao folk opera in long-term resettlement process?" In this way, the inquiry is purged of the imperative for the medium to conform to an externally based set of prior assumptions or directives.

This discovery is reminiscent of the need for balance acknowledged by Ross Kidd after the Zimbabwe workshop between the objectives of "pushing thinking forward" and the "building popular control." (Kidd 1984:73). To push a folk medium into meeting the specifications of an externally defined educational objective too quickly and forcefully may well endanger its integrity as a traditional form of cultural expression over which the artists have internal control.

Throughout the field research cycle, the process of revising the main question also had the effect of clarifying the implementing questions and delineating more realistic categories for analyzing the data. Rather than considering all of the information gathered through the interviews, observations, and reflection solely on the basis of how media could be better designed to solve specific community problems, the objective became one of exploring avenues for documenting existing efforts to address the larger issues. Similarly, redefinition of the original question shifted the balance in my relationship with the troupe and community to one of observer and reporter, having initiated the cycle and set up certain conditions for the production, yet relinquishing virtually all control over its artistic direction.

This role became even more clearly defined during the reflection sessions, during which both troupe members and audience began offering critical comments spontaneously that were directly relevant to the central issue, and which suggested confidence in my sincerity and discretion in reporting them.

Ongoing reflection and revision of the premise of the inquiry is a feature of community based action research (Lewin 1946) in that each cycle is refined as a result of the previous one, producing in the end a set of approaches to problems that are both practical and effective, and benefit not only the researcher but also the collaborators. Although the cycle of *Yaad Namtaa* was exploratory, and as such did not produce definitive solutions to community problems, it was fundamentally educational in that it set up the conditions for a two-way exchange of information and views centered on an overall plan for longer-term community action.

A related discovery that resulted in striking a balance between the initial research design and the troupe's own agenda was that the desired action was basically already in process at the time of my initial contact with the troupe. It did not need to be planned and facilitated from the start, only supported, observed, reflected upon, and reported. Insistence upon the initiation of a completely new script in linear response to the issues identified in the initial interviews and discussions would have, in fact, rendered the project immobile, since troupe members did not consider themselves capable of improvisation and recreation of dramatic dialogue to the extent I had assumed.

As it happened, the script they offered for adaptation essentially coincided with the same issues in a fresh and creative way I had never imagined, thereby pre-empting my assumption that community concerns were not already part of the troupe's agenda; that they had to be externally directed to include such concerns in their performances. In terms of thematic focus, our collaboration was more a matter of clarifying priorities and establishing technical parameters, then withdrawing from the creative decisions to in order to allow for the adaptation process to address these concerns in its own way. Thereafter, the focus shifted from process to product through the creation of character, plot, word play, visual display, and musical style that are the distinctive trade marks of *lam luang* (dramatic *lam* with a relatively large cast).

As a result of these discoveries and events, the main purpose of the data analysis and of my personal reflections became to establish legitimate connections between the performance themes and modes of *Yaad Namtaa* and the current concerns in the community.

Field Study Reflections

As a stage one "fact-finding" or "reconnaissance mission" the action research cycle using Providence troupe's production of *Yaad Namtaa* as its focal point, the data fell into five categories: (1) identification of community issues (2) process observations (3) the videotaped performance of *Yaad Namtaa*, (4) performance reflections and (5) process reflections.

The common thread that emerged in the analysis was the deep concern over how, over the long term, the community can successfully adapt to life in America without losing their cultural identity as Lao. Confusion over the question, "Can we still be Lao in America?" is constantly exacerbated by the mixed signals sent through the public educational system and the mass media. Systems currently under construction for the preservation of what is collectively understood to distinguish the community as Lao include the development of the Lao-American *sangha*, publication of Lao educational materials, informal transfer of performance skills, and a loosely organized network for the distribution and exchange of media.

Certain elements of Lao culture, as represented in the form of legends, rituals, music, and drama, are among the vehicles that allow for the preservation and revitalization process to occur. The role of these elements at the current stage of the Lao diaspora was only vaguely understood a the outset of this research project. The role of externally initiated research and institutional interest in supporting such activities both publicizes and validates their importance, creating conditions for the intergenerational and intercultural dialogue that is vital to the resolution of conflicts within the community, as well as to a more affirmative self-definition of ethnicity in America.

The Refugee Dilemma

In both initial interviews and performance reflections, community members repeatedly emphasized Lao definitions of self, family, and community in which find their expression through choice of language, dress, behavior, and performance modes. In America, the younger generation is exposed to a wide range of choice available in each of these areas and is subject to the pressures of public schools, peer groups, and media to conform to ways of thinking, dressing, and expressing themselves that are essentially alien to the culture of their parents.

In rural Laos, such choices were either nonexistent or extremely limited, and the social structure of the whole village, as represented and enforced by the community of monks (*sangha*), provided the moral and disciplinary codes that assured the ongoing survival and identity of Lao culture. The fact that as Lao-American youth, they are sanctioned by the wider society and its educational systems to make choices that often do not concur with these cultural elements is the source of great distress among their parents and grandparents, who perceive the American way of life as one in which people appear to care more about amassing wealth and status than they do about one another. Familial and community relationships which could be trusted in Laos, particularly the obligation of children to honor and care for their elders, are in danger of being abandoned in the United States.

On the other hand, successful adaptation is envisioned by the Lao community mainly in economic terms in ways that conform to the classic, middle class American dream, with extra emphasis on future security and children's education. In the Lao-American version of the dream, there are also sufficient funds for temple donations, private merit-making (*het boun*), elaborate weddings, and journeys back to visit relatives in Laos. To achieve these economic gains, parents recognize the need for working hard, living frugally, learning English, and pushing their children to achieve academic success. The dilemma arises when they, or their children, identify with what is perceived as the Anglo-American success model or with the less accepted behavior of multicultural peer groups to the extent that they abandon or openly reject their "Lao-ness."

This issue, in all of its complexity and dismay, emerged as the major focus of reflections based on the ongoing development of the troupe's activities and repertoire, as well as on the videotaped performance of *Yaad Namtaa*. Through the development of the characters and the rendering of a refugee story, the performance offers clearly drawn characters as role models for coping with the trauma of forced migration and resettlement.

Models for Acculturation in *Yaad Namtaa*

In the performance of *Yaad Namtaa*, the female protagonist (Viengkham) finds her life irreversibly disrupted, first by the harsh retributions taken against her husband by the revolutionary government, then by the forced departure of her husband (Phaytoune). These circumstances echo the stories recounted by the community members interviewed during the issue-identification stage, who either stated or suggested that the conditions which forced them to make the choice had in some way become intolerable. In this way, the first scenes in *Yaad Namtaa* offer elaborate justification for the migration of all Lao refugees, but particularly those who fled soon after the Communist victory and were in danger of being sent to re-education camps or having their property confiscated.

The fear of losing connections, Lao ethical values, and family ties is expressed in the short memory of the character Phaytoune, who laments impending departure only briefly, and quickly becomes caught up in bright lights and promises of adventure on the Thai bank of the Mekong. A few months later, after his immigration to New England, Phaytoune appears to have lost all memory of his wife and unborn child.

Khamnang, the refugee widow with whom Phaytoune becomes enamored at the mall, represents the antithesis of the virtuous Viengkham. In many ways, she has fulfilled the Lao stereotype of "American" by achieving considerable material success yet losing her Lao sense of propriety, ethical conduct, and community. Her interest in Phaytoune is motivated only by selfish desire, he is another plaything to be acquired and bundled home from the mall. Once attached to her, he becomes a shadow of the Lao Army officer he had been, totally dependent on her, perhaps reflecting Lao perceptions of the externally mandated shift in gender roles in culturally assimilated Lao-American families.

The rejection of Lao values by the competitive, scheming Khamnang and the marginalization of Phaytoune through his relationship with her thus represent two negative models of acculturation. The alternative suggested at the end by Viengkham's friends and supporters, both in the drama and the audience, represents a third model which incorporates the very essence of the Buddhist *dhamma* while dealing with the practical matters of learning the ropes in America and becoming self-sufficient.

According to Buddhist teaching, everything, including marital and community relationships, are subject to constant permutations and change. When Viengkham repeats her mournful lament, *bo mii phai thi asai dai* (I have no one I can count on), she is stating a fact about the nature of suffering and the pain of human existence.

> We heard our fathers repeating all day that life is suffering, that nothing belongs to us, that this present existence is only one among a thousand others, that we were reaping the fruit of our past actions in former lives, that death could overtake us unexpectedly at any moment and that our salvation depended on ourselves alone. And then our fathers enjoined us humility and gentleness, kindness, justice, and charity. (Abhay 1959: 242)

Therefore, in the conclusion offered by the audience participants, Viengkham is not expected to seek revenge against either her pathetic husband or his paramour; they are left to the miseries so explicitly illustrated in the Wheel of Becoming, the web of misery spun out over many lives that their amoral actions in this one will produce. Rather, Viengkham chooses to face the reality that she in fact has no one other than herself to depend on. By extension, neither does anyone else in this world; little progress can be made along the path toward enlightenment until the seeker faces this, among other, facts of existence.

However, all is not lost. She still has her two *phii-nong*, her only remaining connections with Laos, who support and comfort her in a selfless, compassionate way. It is also presumed that she would find friends in the community who would act as contacts and mentors through the initial stages of her resettlement. Ultimately, however, she would have to learn how to survive in America on her own by overcoming the obstacles of language, economic dependency, and lack of familiarity with "the system." The advice of the viewers and the troupe to "try hard" and "not give up" echoes their own personal and group strategies for coping with the continued difficulties of economic and cultural survival.

As applied to the dilemma of intergenerational conflict and acculturative stress, Viengkham's model implies that while some ties with the past are best abandoned, others (the supportive community) form an essential and comforting safety net from which one can begin to rebuild. To cut oneself off from the community, to totally reject one's Lao-ness, is self-defeating and dangerous. From the reflection sessions, it is evident that the elements of culture which community members feel are most important to retain at this stage of resettlement signified by the growth of the Lao *sangha* in America, the tight social organization of the community, and the growth of both traditional and modern performance arts. The role of *lam* in America thus parallels that of *boria* in Malaysia in that it describes and interprets experience in fresh new ways, and as such is a popular medium for the reconstruction of community history, as perceived internally. As suggested in Viengkham's story and in the case of the cannibal ghost in Seattle, these actions, whether symbolic are actual, are empowering in that they confirm the ability of Lao strategies to effectively address Lao problems. As with other forms of folk drama, the audience and the performers are part of the same social milieu, and are therefore sanctioned to participate in the next act of the real life drama.

The Process

While the initial interviews of community leaders, the family, and the seven individuals did lead to the identification and discussion of some issues, these methods did not reach the levels of depth and intensity that were reached in discussions at the later stages. As anticipated, the use of direct interviewing techniques to elicit perceptions of community problems were not openly rejected, but failed for the most part to draw out extended comments on problematic issues or suggestions for dealing with them. While the informational questions received pat, sometimes abrupt responses, those that attempted to illicit critical commentary on training programs or life in America were politely avoided, except by the more confident and openly expressive community leaders.

For example, questions intended to explore issues of discrimination in New England were most often answered, "no problem," even though extemporaneous conversations outside the context of the interviews referred directly to the variety and depth of discrimination experienced by the Lao in New England. Not feeling free to relocate or even travel outside Southeast Asian enclaves was but one example of this experience.

In other areas, however, participants in the initial interviews seemed anxious to relate their personal histories in Laos. Facts revealed through these interviews drew attention the extent the war-related disruption in the lives of the people interviewed, even those whose home villages had been untouched by direct violence. While recent histories and accounts of Lao culture portrayed a peacetime village society, the reality for these adults was one of military service, relocation, and radical change. While my previous assumption was that virtually all Lao men over the age of 40 would have spent time as monks or novices in their villages, only the older man (at 69) had received significant religious training.

Among the family members and other adults interviewed, the most popular topics for conversation were in reference to life in Laos, particularly when the respondents were afforded the opportunity to explain their village skills, customs, and their way of life before its disruption by the war. One surprising observation was that every adult who was asked was able to remember the exact date of arrival in the United States, in contrast to vague recollections of other dates and time periods that would also seem to be of consequence (marriage, birth of children). When asked about this, one Lao-American project assistant explained that the day of arrival had been the most consequential day of their lives, the point both of a new beginning and of no return. In hindsight, many older Lao still feel the need to justify their decision by reminding themselves of the dire consequences of staying.

In this instance, as in many others, the secondary reflection on the initial responses, like the "off the record" comments made to me during informal conversations or gatherings, were often more substantive than the responses to direct questioning. The strategy of simply "hanging around" at temple functions, social affairs, and *moh lam* rehearsals also proved the most productive means of gathering authentic commentary on the issues and observing the process of production and apprenticeship first hand. I generally found that the less obtrusive and openly curious I was, the more willing people were to offer information, explanations, and critical commentary. As a result, many important statements were not recorded on audio or video tape, as originally planned, but taken down in the form of notes and reconstructed from memory minutes after leaving the scene.

The process of negotiation and planning for the ACTV production produced several interesting observations: (1) that the troupe had a highly efficient organization for decision making, training, rehearsal, and production based on Lao *moh lam* social, economic, and educational structures. (2) that the troupe had established traditional "master-apprentice" relationships, both with its *guru*-scriptwriter in Vermont and with its new trainees in Providence and Webster. (3) that the troupe was amenable and adaptable to standard studio recording and switching strategies similar to those used soap opera and sitcom production. These were seen by the troupe as enhancing the drama and pleasing the younger generation of Lao-Americans, (4) that the adaptation based on a time limitation of two hours was difficult and artistically unsatisfactory from the performers' point of view in that it did not allow for full development of character and the incorporation of additional musical interludes which they felt would have added to the production.

The reflection phase of the action research cycle shed additional light on methods of inquiry and the use of informal educational media in the Lao-American community. As reported in Chapter 7, the use of a theatrical medium to reflect on one's own problems through a fictional set of characters in symbolic interaction was found to be far more effective than direct questioning. This coincides directly with the use of parables and similes to illustrate philosophical principles and teach codes of ethical behavior in the Therevada Buddhist tradition, as well as with the incorporation of historical legends and *nitaan* (folk tales) in the oral tradition of the Lao. Finally, the reflection process established that the quality of the relationship between researcher and community members demanded a trust-building phase in which personal roles were categorized and clarified by the community in terms that were acceptable to each group of participants.

The question of whether *lam* can remain a dynamic and useful medium for community education in America will also be answered in time by the community's own interest in sustaining it. To do so, the younger generation must produce performers, musicians, and an provide a receptive audience as the elders and the middle generation, who are still fluent in the language and traditions of Laos, pass on. Troupes must also find ways to remain economically viable, either by seeking external support as community artists and educators, or by generating income sufficient to promote their continued artistic development.

Finally, as members of the Providence troupe are well aware, the survival of *moh lam* in America will depend partly on its versatility in adapting to the new social, cultural, and aesthetic tastes of the younger generation. As in the later phases of *El Teatro Campesino*, this may require an assertive return to cultural roots as well as the flexibility and expertise necessary to incorporate the artistic and technical apparatus that facilitates the expression this heritage as a significant piece of the North American cultural mosaic.

Recommendations for Further Research

The continuation of action research in the same community could take several directions, depending on the objectives of a much longer, more extensive inquiry into the production and applications of endogenous media. Based on what has been observed during the process of identifying community issues, collaborating in the production of *Yaad Namtaa*, and reflecting on its themes, one path of further inquiry might involve the production and wider distribution of a second story, collaborating more closely with the troupe on the technical as well as artistic aspects of the performance. Increasing internal control over where, when, and how forthcoming performances are taped and edited would enable the troupe to reach a wider audience and gain access to experimentation with contemporary styles and sounds its members seek in order to win the interest and approval of the younger generation.

The most logical steps in this direction would include the selection and training of troupe members and friends as studio producers, crew, and editors to use a local radio and public access television stations to record and broadcast new *luang*. Such performances could be a regular feature on a program devoted to Lao music, news and and cultural events which might also include religious documentaries and sermons by the local *sangha*.

Although there are no easy solutions to the intergenerational conflict in the Lao community, the planning and facilitation of such media projects might also serve to create the conditions for traditional patterns of learning to occur. For example, younger Lao producers would be in the position of seeking the advice, counsel, and skills of the elders in history, language, and traditional arts; meanwhile, as part of this exchange, they would also act as cross-cultural mediators and guides in explanatory negotiations and interpretations to a wider audience. External validation of such locally produced media through access to cable broadcasting systems could serve as a means of breaking down the sense of alienation and loss experienced by both elders and youth.

As a result of this study, I found that the issues of upheaval, loss, and acculturative stress are still central to the Lao-American community in Providence, despite the apparent economic well-being of many of its members. At the same time, community members are collectively and actively involved in developing internal resources for dealing with these seemingly insurmountable problems. The effectiveness of these strategies is partially dependent on their recognition and validation by representatives of the dominant culture, particularly educators and health workers who interact with the community on a regular basis, and whose perceptions help shape the restructuring process.

Individual and family conflicts are often not apparent to outsiders until they reach crisis proportions, partly because of the reluctance of the Lao to express their inner feelings and be assertive in their complaints, and partly because of the fear that these complaints would be interpreted as criticism or lack of appreciation for what has been given. However, the distress lies close enough to the surface to be expressed in a non-threatening context to outsiders whom community members feel they can depend on for support and advice on specific problems. Further cycles of action research should therefore seek to establish these relationships in ways that the collaborative planning of long-term solutions, using the resources and skills that originate in both worlds, may also be initiated.

Considerations in Media Choice and Program Design

Based on community perceptions, the causes of long-term acculturative stress are rooted less in current economic conditions than in spiritual confusion and cultural bereavement. The forces of American cultural homogeneity are reinforced daily through the dominant media, as well as through the materials and curricula that permeate the public schools, as well as many adult education programs. The production, distribution, and facilitation of alternative media and educational materials would serve to counter these forms of linguistic and cultural domination by validating home language, local knowledge, and traditional skills. While efforts of this nature are already underway within the community, external support would lead to a more equitable and harmonious relationship.

The review of literature on orality and literacy in rural Lao society reveals that modes of communication and creative expression within the home cultural context are predominantly oral and musical. Literacy in Lao script, while it carries considerable status, is not necessarily seen as a pre-requisite to the transfer of knowledge. Therefore, in the choice of media and teaching approach in facilitating better understanding of the legal, educational, and political labyrinth which the Lao call "the system" in America, personal contact and electronic media should take precedence over print.

Similarly, in programs and materials designed to facilitate acquisition of language skills, a sociolinguistic view of learning in the Lao-American cultural context suggests that the primary mode of teaching stress context rich audio-visual media over print materials. Based on further research on the nature of language use in the community, easily accessible media for the teaching of both English and Lao could become a major factor in the reduction of intergenerational stress. The oral nature of learning would also suggest a whole language, communicative methodology stressing extensive and immediate personal interaction rather than a teacher centered syllabus built on a hierarchy of grammatical structures and literacy skills.

The examination of traditional teacher-learner relationships in religious and secular community educational arrangements suggests that the ideal relationship is long rather than short term, is personal rather than strictly formal, is supportive rather than domineering, and characteristically expects a certain respectful distance between knower and learner to be maintained.

Reconstruction of these relationships within the community, as in the induction of novices over the summer at the Providence temple and the training of apprentice *moh lam*, will inevitably be altered as a result of cultural adaptation. However, it is important to recognize what is perceived as positive and how these accommodations are made within the community, so that the quality of intercultural teaching relationships in workplace and institutional settings can be informed and improved.

Finally, in reference to the major concern of Lao-Americans over how to maintain their cultural integrity and articulate their identity, it is essential community members of all ages gain confidence as a group in their freedom and abilities to do so. The message all too often sent through adult educational materials, monocultural school curricula, and through the broadcast media is to assimilate to a life style based on competition, conformity, and materialism. Peer group pressure in the inner city all too often calls for a rejection of suburban work ethic in favor of a life style based in drugs and violence, but which also demands the accumulation of material wealth as the main measure of status and success. Both messages are in stark contrast to the *dhamma*, which emphasizes spirituality, detachment, and the Middle Path.

Alternatives to the meta-message of the mass media might usefully stress a larger vision of a multicultural America in which heterogenous groups, each maintaining a distinct cultural identity, are both welcome and celebrated. Such media could stress models for acculturation that emphasize accommodation rather than assimilation as an acceptable, even preferable, relationship to the society as a whole.

Policy Recommendations

The reality of sociocultural diversity in the United States has far outpaced its public policy and public attitudes, which are basically unicultural in orientation (Berry 1986:30). Although it has been argued that the linguistic and cultural assimilation to immigrants was not always part of public policy, it has pervaded thinking on the education of immigrants since the rise of the Americanization movement in the 1920's.

The Lao-American community response to the methodologies, materials, and educational practices grounded in the unicultural policy has essentially been one of withdrawal on the part of the elders and attempted assimilation by the youth. As a result, the elders have failed to gain the skills necessary for a successful, self-directed adaptation, and the younger generation are in the process of losing their language and heritage, yet remain marginalized in the context of what they have experienced as the dominant society. Elders are no longer valued as teachers, and monks must struggle to establish and maintain their authority in the community. Transfer of skills through apprenticeship relationships is no longer the norm, and in the world of practical skills training, instruction manuals and computers have replaced human beings as the most reliable resources.

The coping strategies developed by the community to ameliorate at least some of these these conditions and conflicts are vital to its survival. The change of direction that adult education could take in response to a public policy more committed to multiculturalism would be to assist and support these strategies, collaborating with community leaders and production groups in the reinstatement of Lao community educational systems. In order to move in this direction, representatives of the adult educational establishment must be willing to shed hierarchical standards based on formal educational levels or competency based curricula, and instead be willing to include community elders as resources and teachers, both for the younger generation of Lao and for other Americans who wish to become students of Lao culture. In order to establish effective learning relationships for the transfer of adaptive skills, it is also essential to eliminate the pressures of time limits and tests, replacing these and other punitive measures with internally motivated learning sessions in supportive, easily accessible and comfortable environments.

Fifteen years after migration, the Lao-American community is at another turning point in its history. The generation whose primary life experiences took place in Laos is growing older, and a new generation of American born children is coming of age in the country whose geopolitical adventures in Southeast Asia were the root cause of their current predicament. Having brought virtually nothing with them other than their memories, skills, and talents, elders are anxious to pass these intangible elements of culture and history on, but find the younger generation increasingly distant and unreceptive.

The adult education research and planning agenda can begin to build positive two-way relationships with community elders by incorporating Lao perspectives on community education, educational media, and learning styles. Given the costs of not doing so, addressing these issues at this point in time is both wise and imperative. For refugees suddenly catapulted from a palm-leaf manuscript oral culture into a world of books, newspapers, computers, television, radio, telephones, and fax machines, modes of communication must inevitably change. Additionally, the resettlement has involved a sudden shift from rural to urban environments, necessitating the radical restructuring of relationships, both internal and external.

What is the role of education and educational media during the course of these adaptation processes? While it is impossible for the home cultural environment to be recreated, attention to the old ways of knowing and learning should be of great significance in the planning of educational programs. This type of approach places the learner in the more powerful position of having something to contribute to the new environment, rather than being seen as an empty vessel to be filled with new facts, ideas, and ways of thinking. The act of inquiry into the learners' world has a validating effect, counter to the degrading effects of adult education programs which stress cultural domination and of hastily yet carefully preserved treasures that have risked getting broken or lost in the mayhem of a sudden upheaval. There are, in this and other Southeast Asian-American communities, many such untapped resources and undervalued gems which are essential to their survival and assertion as distinct peoples.

In the Lao case, oral specialists such as *moh lam* and *moh khaen* have traditionally played a central role in the skillful construction and oral transmission of community history and the assertion of lowland Lao ethnicity. It is essential that such artists be encouraged to reclaim their role as popular educators as well as entertainers in the new context, co-existing with the more formalized *sangha* as guardians of ethics and promoters of restructured cultural norms. If handled with care, movement toward this goal can become part of a more positive chapter in the history of both rural Southeast Asia and urban America.

competency based job training. The role of external support systems in the validation of such endogenous approaches to community education in the multicultural landscape of urban America is perhaps the larger question subsequent research projects might find beneficial to explore.

Such an approach may appear to demand a completely separate set of learning strategies and materials for each immigrant group, a requirement that bring its feasibility into question. However, ethnographies of learning in traditional societies reveal many similarities (as well as differences) among them. Awareness on the part of planners, teachers, and media specialists allows them to become more flexible in sharing the responsibility for program design with their collaborators in the community. The more that is known about learning styles among diverse groups, the better the opportunity to create common ground for the negotiation and management of learning events. From the language teaching perspective, such groups create opportunities for meaningful communication in a supportive environment where culture is not only created but shared. Folk drama, along with other traditional media, can help stimulate such events in a wide variety of educational settings.

A Lao *moh lam* troupe performing for a Lao audience in America is a phenomenon that was inconceivable as recently as twenty years ago. To explore its unique qualities as a form of cultural expression and to witness its development in New England has been something like sifting through a collection

APPENDIX A

THREE ASIAN MODELS OF ADULT NONFORMAL EDUCATION

(1) Nonformal Primary Education in India

Sponsoring Organization: Indian Institute of Education
Setting
- **Place:** Pune, State of Maharashtra (western India)
- **Time:** 1978-82

Problem: High dropout rates among children 6-14 in rural India despite universal primary education goals. Main causes are poverty-driven, eg. need for children (especially girls) to share in household chores or add to family income

Program/Project Objective: to provide basic education to non-literate working children, specific learning goals determined in collaboration with community, strong emphasis on social reformation by breaking down caste system in favor or "goal-based individual and group identities"

Learner Characteristics: poor, mostly girls (1060 of 1451), ages 9-14, median age 11, parents farmers, artisans, or laborers

Teacher Characteristics: young (average age 32), recruited from local community, primary vocation farmers, artisans, construction workers. Secondary school graduates, intensive training in NFE by Indian Institute of Education.

Teacher-Learner Relationship: personal, supportive, teachers addressed as elder brother or sister

Conditions:
- **Timing** - daily, part-time, evenings 7-9 pm to fit learners' working schedules, vacations planned around agricultural cycle & local festivals
- **Grouping** - 20 learners per group, ungraded
- **Venue** - provided by village (17 in program), usually empty room, kerosene lanterns, portable equipment & materials
- **Climate Setting** - "tidying up" (scrubbing and combing), traditional greetings & prayers

Materials/Media: primer, literacy/numeracy cards, games produced by teachers & project staff; learner-collected realia, songs, stories

Notes: Learners were not enthusiastic about the primer, and it was eventually dropped; assessment after one year of classes showed indreased confidence, skills, community support, but still a 19% dropout rate.

Source: Naik, Chitra, "An Action-Research Project on Universal Primary Education" in Kelly, Gail and Carolyn M. Elliot (eds.) Women's Education in the Third World: Comparative Perspectives Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1982.

(2) The Sarvodaya Movement in Sri Lanka

Sponsoring Organization: Sarvodaya Shramanada
Place: Sri Lanka
Time: 1958-present

Problem: Worsening of economic conditions for Sri Lankan villagers, marginalization.resulting from cash economy, consumerism, etc.

Program/Project Objective: spiritual, social, and economic regeneration of rural society through awakening of human potential

Learner Characteristics: village adults (all ages), poor, minimal formal education

Teacher Characteristics: young extension workers, village monks

Teacher-Learner Relationship: collaborative, motivational

Conditions:
  Timing - irregular, planned in collaboration with community leaders
  Grouping - informal "family gatherings," any size
  Venue - village centers, temples
  Climate Setting - chants, prayers

Materials/Media: slogans, public speeches, traditional Buddhist art, charts & diagrams, extemporaneous sung verse

Notes: The name Sarvodaya means "awakening," its main goals being to connect economic and spiritual goals by applying Buddhist principles to village self-help projects.

Source: Macy, Joanna. Dharma and Development: Religion as Resource in the Sarvodaya Self-Help Movement. West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1983.

(3) Socially Engaged Buddhism in Siam

Sponsoring Organization: Buddhist *Sangha*
Place: Surin Province, Siam (Thailand)
Time: present

Problem: Economic hardship caused by deforestation, dependence on cash economy, exploitation of labor and natural resources by multi-nationals based in Bangkok

Program/Project Objective: to reintroduce "collective mindfulness," in village life, reclaim traditional values of cooperation and sharing of resources

Learner Characteristics: poor, older adults, subsistence farmers & laborers

Teacher Characteristics: village monks, trained by provincial abbot

Teacher-Learner Relationship: traditional, resident monk-laity

Conditions:

- **Timing** - integrated with normal temple teaching activities + evening organizational sessions
- **Grouping** - small gatherings, elders + all interested
- **Venue** - village *wat*, villagers' homes
- **Climate Setting** - chants, prayers, traditional ceremonies, meditation

Materials/Media: demonstrations, sermons, group discussion, references to *dhamma, Jataka* tales

Notes: Major projects included convincing farmers to establish rice and buffalo banks at village temples, which could be used by anyone in need. According to Srivaraksa, villagers are gradually learning through participation in such projects to rely on traditional values and practices.

Source: Sivaraksa, Sulak. Seeds of Peace. Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1992.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDES

(1) Community Issues Interview Guide
June-August, 1992

Interview # Length M/F

1. Personal Information

Place of origin: Age:

Other residence in Laos:

Year of departure: Time in refugee camp:

Date of arrival: First residence in U.S:

Years in Providence:

2. Background in Laos

a. Description of home village/town

b. Main occupation

c. Educational background

d. Use of foreign language(s)

e. Travel

f. Experience as a novice or monk

g. Other educational experience (apprenticeships, etc.)

h. Special skills

3. Transition Period

a. Education/job training while in Thailand

b. Other camp experience

4. Life in the U.S.A.

a. Main occupation

b. Further education or training (after arrival in the US)

c. Comments on ESL/job training training programs

d. Transfer of skills learned in Laos or Thailand

e. Main differences

f. Relationship with Americans

g. Present economic situation

h. Better or worse (general)?

5 Adaptation Problems and Issues

a. General state of mind

b. Main problems

5. Goals and Resources

a. Being Lao in America

b. Ways to maintain sense of Lao identity

6. Hopes for the future

a. children/grandchildren - knowledge about Laos

b. Americans about Laos/Lao culture

(2) Audience Interview Guide
August, 1992

1. After Viengkham found out that her mother had died, she decided to leave Laos to look for her husband. Do you think that was a good decision? Why/why not?

2. After all of his promises, why did Phaytoune forget her and marry Khamnang when he got to America?

3. At the end of the story, Viengkham has nothing - no family, no husband, no job. How can she survive in America? What advice would you give her?

4. What do you think will happen to Viengkham after a few years in America?

5. Did you watch "*moh lam*" much in Laos? Do you watch it here? What kind of stories do you prefer?

6. Is this story similar to your own experience to to anyone's you know? Please explain.

7. What other art forms and traditional practices are important to keep alive in America? Why?

8. How can Lao culture best be preserved in America? Please make some specific recommendations.

APPENDIX C

PERFORMANCE CONTRACT FOR *YAAD NAMTAA*

Performance Contract

The Lao Folk Arts Project (LFAP) of Amherst, Massachusetts hereby agrees to sponsor one two-hour videoptaped performance by the Moh Lam Luang Troupe (the Troupe) of Providence for a fee of:

$800 + 50 (travel expenses) = $850

> To be paid in cash to the Troupe upon completion of the performance in Amherst. The Troupe agrees to furnish LFAP with a receipt for the performance.

The Troupe agrees that more production time (up to three hours in the studio), may be necessary in order to produce a two-hour video, and agrees to be ready to begin no later than 1:00 p.m. on Saturday, June 20, 1992 unless postponed or cancelled at the agreement of both parties. The Troupe further agrees to provide a cast of singers and musicians appropriate to the style of performance. The Troupe understands the purpose of the video and will present a performance based on the real experience of Lao refugees in the United States. A summary of the story will be provided to LFAP.

The LFAP agrees to procure production equipment (lights, sound equipment, and cameras) and a production crew for the performance. The Troupe agrees to furnish appropriate scenery, costumes, and musical equipment.

The LFAP retains the right to use all or part of the completed videotape, to distribute copies for educational purposes, and to translate all or part of the performance into English. The LFAP and the Troupe will hold joint copyright to the finished tape, and agree to use the completed video for educational purposes only. Both parties agree that the tape will not be marketed commercially without the written consent of both the Moh Lam Luang Troupe and the Lao Folk Arts Project.

Jean B-Johnston
Lao Folk Arts Project

6/9/92
date

Phimpone Ratsabout
Moh Lam Luang Troupe

6/15/92
date

APPENDIX D

EXCERPTS FROM *YAAD NAMTAA*

Excerpt (1): *Phaytoune announces his departure*

VIENGKHAM

What do you mean...you are leaving me to go to Thailand? Why do you speak to me like that? You're going to leave me all alone? Who's going to support me?

PHAYTOUNE

There is no other way, my dear. I want you to wait here for me. When I get to Thailand, I will get everything ready, then I will come back for you. I promise! Listen! I don't really want to leave you...to leave our homeland, our relatives and friends. I wonder why these problems don't happen to others - only us. I think it is our destiny. What do you think? Tell me now...I don't have much time. If they know I'm here, they will come and kill me. I hope that you don't have any problems after I leave. I wish you luck!

Excerpt (2): *Phaytoune's arrival in Thailand*

PHAYTOUNE

I have arrived here in Thailand. I am still alive, after the hell of the escape. I am so lucky. It is still dark, early in the morning. The street lights are still on. Oh! Look at all this progress! It seems like a fantasy world to me. I am on my way now to the camp to register. I am so happy....I have been able to run away from the red Lao to see a country that has enjoyed all this prosperity.

Excerpt (3): *Viengkham's return to her family home*

KHAMPOUN

(hears a knock at the door) Who could it be at this hour? Oh, Viengkham! How are you? Where have you been? Why did you get here so late?

VIENGKHAM

I'll tell you later...it's a long story. Do you know where my mother is? She's not in our house.

KHAMPOUN

If I tell you, please don't think about it too much. I'll explain to you tomorrow. It's time to rest now.

VIENGKHAM
It's all right...go ahead. Please tell me now.

KHAMPOUN
Um...um...I'd rather not...but if you really must know I will tell you. Your mother died a few weeks ago. The neighbors made all the funeral arrangements...we knew you must be in some kind of trouble, so we decided to help your family. I hope you won't be too sad even though your mother is gone. I am still here beside you, as your real sister.

VIENGKHAM
What am I going to do now? All the time I was in prison, I expected to be able to come home and live with my mother after I got out. I have nobody to depend on...(starts to cry).

KHAMPOUN
Please don't think about it too much now. Nobody lives forever.

VIENGKHAM
There is nothing I can say...only tears and crying...when I was in jail, I didn't even know that my mother had died. Why did it have to happen? I just want to die, along with my dear mother, to get out of this land that has caused so many problems for everybody. Now I have no relatives or cousins who can help me through my problems. I had planned to depend on my mother, but now she's gone, too. I've lost everything...please help me, sister.

KHAMPOUN
(to audience)...and so I invited her to stay at my house. In the meantime, we both prayed to *Pha Put* and *Pha In* (Indra) to help us attain whatever we deserve, according to our merit.

Excerpt (4): *Phaytoune and Khun on their way to the mall*

KHUN
Driving a car, the road is so clean...watching a piece of dust go up and down. Look at those mountains, high and low. Speeding down the highway, there is no traffic problem here. Look! There is someone walking, maybe I can race against the wind. Keep stepping on the gas until we reach 100, to race the wind. Only a few minutes more until we get to Vermont. I'd better switch gears to get the car to slow down.

PHAYTOUNE
(at the mall) Khun! Take a look over there!

KHAMNANG

(introduction, to audience) My name is Khamnang. I'm a widow. I've been in America for about ten years now. I have everything I need except a guy who will stay with me. I need somebody to keep me warm, especially in this freezing weather. Today is a nice day to go shopping. It would be nice if I meed some guy who would be my boyfriend. I can't stand living like this any more...(dances)

PHAYTOUNE

(to Khun) Look at all these things! Electrical appliances, lights...they are all so beautiful. I'd love to have them in our house. Come on, let's buy some.

KHUN

Oh, there are some girls. I'm going over there to chat with them. Girls! Come on over! Good morning! How are you doing? Oh, you two are so beautiful. Do you have husbands yet?

Excerpt (5): *Viengkham's arrival in America*

VIENGKHAM

(at Logan Airport, with Khampong and Khampoun) It seems incredible...at last, here we are in the land where my husband lives. I wish he were here to welcome us, but I don't even know where he lives now. I look around, but he isn't here. I want to see him now.

Excerpt (6): *Viengkham finds Phaytoune*

PHAYTOUNE

(doorbell rings) Come in!

KHAMPONG

Hello, Phaytoune...how are you? Do you know...I've brought someone with me...someone you have been thinking of.

PHAYTOUNE

I don't know who you mean...

KHAMPOUN

(loudly) Someone that you miss a lot!

PHAYTOUNE

Who are you talking about? Please tell me. I will be happy to find out who it is.

KHAMPOUN

Didn't you used to have a wife...before you came to America?

PHAYTOUNE

Yes, that's true...I did.

KHAMPOUN

I'll bring her in.

PHAYTOUNE

Oh, please do...I have a new wife now, but I still have to see Viengkham.

VIENGKHAM

(outside the door, to audience) That is no surprise. Even though he promised me he wouldn't marry again, I find out now that it's true. I'm so disappointed. After my mother died, the only thing left for me was to follow my husband to America. But now he's married to another woman. How could he hurt me so much?

PHAYTOUNE

(to Viengkham) Is it really you? I don't believe that you are really here. (to Khamnang) Khamnang, this is my wife. (to Viengkham) Believe me, dear, I didn't forget anything I told you. I have been waiting here for you. I have earned some money...I was about to send it to you. Whatever I promised you, I still keep it in my mind. I've been dreaming about you every night. I'm so happy to see you here. (to Khamnang) What do you think? She is my first wife.

KHAMNANG

There is nothing I can say. She is your first wife, and I am your wife, too. She is thinking of herself, and I'm afraid she's going to take you away from me.

VIENGKHAM

I don't believe you have done this to me. There is nothing I can say...only tears and crying. Now there is no one in this world I can really depend on...it hurts me so.

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